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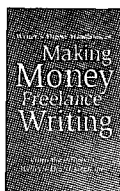
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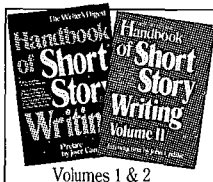
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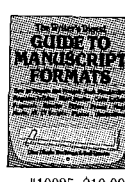


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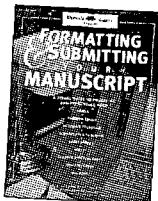
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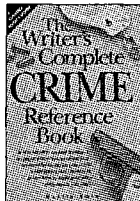
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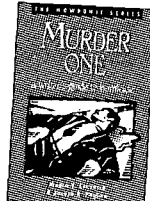
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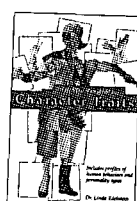
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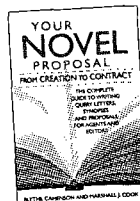
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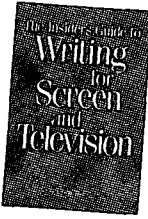
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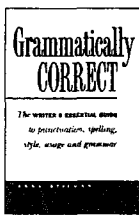
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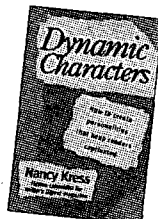
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

We are very happy indeed to announce that I. J. Parker's story "Ak-
itada's First Case," published in
our July-August 1999 issue, has
won the Shamus Award for Best
Private Eye Short Story of 1999.
The Shamuses are presented by
the Private Eye Writers of America;
the ceremony took place at
Bouchercon, in Denver.

Another AHMM author was also
nominated for the award: Mike
Reiss for "Cro-Magnon, P.I." (also in
our July-August 1999 issue), for
which he'd previously won the
1999 Robert L. Fish Memorial
Award for Best First Mystery
Short Story of the year.

The other nominees were Doug
Allyn, for "Unchained Melody"
(EQMM); Jeremiah Healy, for
"Hodegetria" (*Death Cruise*); and
Barbara Paul, for "The Reluctant
Op" (EQMM).

Winners of the other Shamuses

were Don Winslow, *California Fire
and Life* (Knopf), for Best Hardcover
Novel; John Connolly, *Every
Dead Thing* (Simon & Schuster),
for Best First Novel; and Laura
Lippman, *In Big Trouble* (Avon),
for Best Paperback Original Novel.
Congratulations to all—and to
Barry Baldwin, author of "A Bit of
a Treat" in our September 1999
issue; it was nominated for an
Anthony. The winner: Margaret
Chitenden, "Noir Life," EQMM.

In this issue—welcome to Neil A.
Schofield, author of "The Petrosian
Principles." He lives in France, attended
Leeds University Law
School, and is a teacher and translator
as well as a writer. A previous
job: "After going stir-crazy in the
[industrial theatre] corporate sector,
I turned to the writing of tourist
projects, i.e., those soundtracks
which follow you around a museum
or other tourist site." One was
"The Tower of London Experience."

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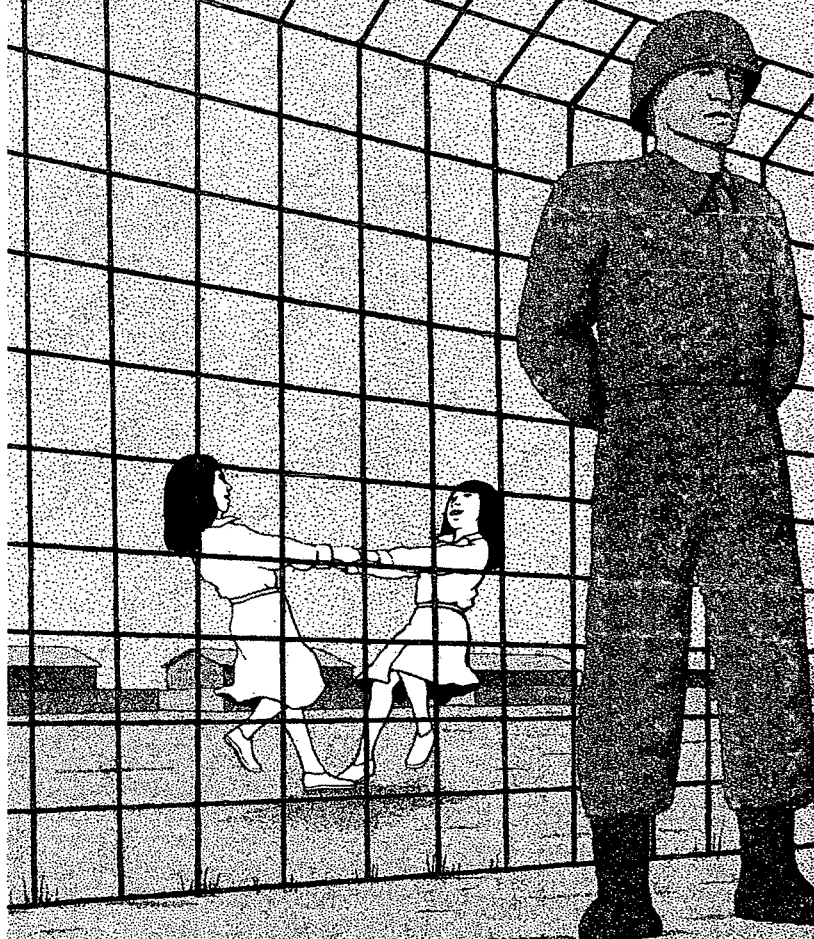
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FICTION

THE NAVARRO SISTERS



David Edgerley Gates

Illustration by David Fielding

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 201

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Almost everybody admitted that Connie Navarro's daughters were the most beautiful girls in Española, but then Connie was a Garza and the Garza women had always been handsome.

Angelina, the older by a year, was a tomboy, and Aurora, the little princess. Their father spoiled them both in equal measure. Victor Navarro was a sweet-tempered man, not always a match for his stronger-willed wife. He had a somewhat abstracted air, a form of protective coloration perhaps. Connie was stricter with the girls, being ambitious for them, but she loved them no less than her husband did.

The two sisters grew up in a world defined by family and the Church, a simpler world than the present one with its uncertainties and mixed messages. In those days *el Norte* was still very traditional, with a strong sense of community, and history a living presence. The families in the upper Rio Grande valley could trace their heritage back to the settlers who had come north from Mexico with Don Juan de Oñate, founder of Santa Fe and first colonial governor of the territory. They had names like C de Baca and Trujillo and Salazar, and their titles to since-disputed claims had been established by royal grant in the late sixteenth century when that most puissant prince the Catholic majesty of Spain had deeded them the lands at the confluence of the Chama and the Rio Grande.

It was the Depression, and people made do. The modern world had been slow in coming to northern

New Mexico. Flush toilets were uncommon in many rural communities. Telephone service was a crazy quilt of local exchanges, unreliable and inefficient. On the big reservation many Navajo did without even well water, depending on seeps and springs. Federal recovery programs were spread thin. Farmers left the land, looking for work on the railroads, in the copper mines or the oilfields, or as stoop labor. Many small settlements became ghost towns.

Then the war came. A sympathetic draft board was willing to give Victor Navarro a deferment, with two young daughters at home, now ten and eleven years old, but he chose to sign up anyway. The girls were old enough to understand the gravity of their father's getting on the train for Fort Leonard Wood, but only its immediate consequences, not the deeper anxieties that troubled Connie, the dread she couldn't voice for fear it might come true. She'd wake up in the middle of the night sick with fear and get up to look in on her daughters, watching them as they slept, wondering how to protect them from her certain knowledge, her prayers for Victor stuck in her throat.

This back story, so domestic and familiar, such an ordinary picture of the home front, was prologue to a violent crime.

Rubén Salvador hung up the phone and finished rolling the cigarette he'd started one-handed while he was on the line. He hooked his boots on the corner of his desk

and struck a wooden match on the seam of his jeans, lit the cigarette, and took a drag, tipping back in his chair, and watched the smoke drift up toward the ceiling of his office. He was still trying to puzzle out the conversation.

Benny Salvador was sheriff of Rio Arriba County. He'd been a lawman thirty years, shot five times and twice given up for dead and he hadn't thought there was much left to surprise him, but he realized you could always be taken on your blind side.

That was the problem, dealing with the army. They only had one way of doing things. Their way. Benny took one last drag on his smoke and pinched it off, dropping it in the empty coffee can he kept on his desk. He smelled trouble.

Benny hoisted himself to his feet and took his hat off the peg and buckled on his gunbelt. He carried a single-action Colt .44, a gun that had fallen out of fashion lately but it was a gun he'd gotten used to, over time, and he knew to stick with what worked for him. If you find a pair of pants that fit, keep wearing them. This was a piece of advice he'd been given some years before by the famous New Mexican peace officer Elfecho Baca, *el Gato*, so-called because he was said to have nine lives.

Benny smiled, thinking of *el Gato*, almost eighty now, and the other old gunman he'd once ridden with, Placido Geist, the near-legendary Texas bounty killer. They'd been known to bend the law if it suited their purpose, but at the close of day they stood for justice. It

was a shopworn word, justice, as much out of favor as a Colt single-action.

Benny went out and got in his Ford truck and drove down to the telephone office. He went inside and poked his head through the partition door. Genoveva Lujan was at the switchboard.

"You hear most of that?" Benny asked her. Ginny nodded yes, her eyes knowing. "You think you can sit on it for a couple of hours?"

Ginny shrugged. "I'm squirming already," she told him.

"Can't ask for better than that," Benny said. He touched his forefinger to the brim of his Stetson and ducked out. Ginny would hold her tongue long enough to give him a running start.

He got behind the wheel of the pickup and headed south. It was about half an hour's drive to Santa Fe, where the army provosts had turned Connie Navarro over to civilian authority. She was charged with felony murder and held without bail.

The war had come home to the Pajarito Plateau in 1943, when the Army Corps of Engineers started work at Los Alamos. Down at the regional office in Albuquerque they referred to the job as the Buck Rogers project because the plans were labeled Demolition Range and it was obvious that Site Y had some other purpose altogether. Security was tight, everything compartmentalized on the basis of need-to-know. Even the name of the issuing authority itself was misleading: Manhattan Engineering District.

They'd taken over a boys' boarding school and removed the small ranchers, sheepherders mostly, who had grazing rights on the mesa. This undertaking wasn't without animosity, and many of the leaseholders and landowners felt cheated. Brigadier General Leslie Groves bulldozed over their objections, and the first perimeter fences started going up at Site Y. Civilian personnel began arriving soon afterwards, before any housing was even ready for them. Two-family units with coal heating were slapped up, and labs, and buildings with odd specifications to house the heavy equipment shipped out from Stone and Webster in Boston. The old road up to the mesa was widened and hardened, to hold up under the increased loads. There was some uninformed speculation about what was going on, but nothing leaked out.

Incidental labor was needed, and the contractor on the job, a company out of Tucson, hired local people for some of the grunt work. They were strictly regimented. Later on, once the eggheads from Chicago and M.I.T. had settled in, their wives wanted housekeepers and nannies, and the word spread.

Connie got a job on Bathtub Row working as a maid. Victor had been gone a year now. His letters were censored, but he'd been assigned to a construction battalion in the Pacific, the hottest theater in the war, for now. Connie could read between the lines. He made it sound boring, a basic routine, but terror was easy to imagine. She suffered through it every night.

Connie was a reliable employee, always clocking in for her shift on time. The girls were in school during the week, but Connie could bring them with her if she had to work on the weekends. Bathtub Row was for the senior scientists, the ones who ranked first. Kitty Oppenheimer herself was two doors down.

The old Ranch School buildings featured hot water and full baths. They were far removed from the Sundt duplexes and Morgan prefabs, hurriedly knocked together out of cheap materials, that those lower in the pecking order were assigned, or the Quonset hut dormitories for support personnel and the GI's. Connie's girls played with the other kids along Bathtub Row, but although there seemed to be a democracy of children, Connie recognized the signs of class differences among the adults. The woman she worked for, Betty Mulgrew, was married to Herman Mulgrew, one of the leading mathematicians at Site Y. Betty was a plain woman, even homely, but she was an intelligent person with a lively face, seldom at rest, that gave her personality. She referred to herself as "*jolie laide*," a French expression Connie had never heard before. Betty and Herman were childless.

Connie usually didn't see much of Herman Mulgrew, and when she did, he always seemed preoccupied. Whatever he did inside the secured area, behind the inner fences, it must take his full attention, even at home. She noticed him standing by the french doors one Saturday afternoon gazing out into the back

yard with a tumbler of scotch in his hand. The children were playing tag outside. Herman was fiercely concentrating, but Connie took it to be inward, as if he didn't really see them at all and was focused on something in his mind's eye. Then she saw him draw himself up physically, shaking off distraction. She glanced out the window. Angelina and Aurora were tumbling about on the grass laughing. When she glanced back again, the expression on Herman's face was one of terrible yearning. Connie didn't think it sinister, at the time. She put it down to the fact that Betty and Herman had no children of their own. She retreated silently from the doorway to the study. She had no wish to intrude on a private grief. She knew herself blessed, that her daughters had filled her own heart. Connie felt sorry for the Mulgrews.

"She's not a flight risk," Benny said. "She's got two daughters to take care of."

That didn't cut any ice with the bailiff. "It's the army's call," he said. He shrugged. "Out of my hands, partner."

Benny went down the hall to the jailer's office to use the phone and call D. D. Chavez. Chavez was in court, he was told. He asked the lawyer's secretary to give D. D. his message.

Something about this business didn't sit right with him. Benny Salvador had seen a lot of things in his years behind the badge, and he could read sign better than most. There had to be a piece missing.

Whatever was going on, it wasn't being done according to Hoyle. Connie was a civilian. Maybe she worked on the Hilltop, as local people had taken to calling the installation at Los Alamos, but she wasn't subject to military law. Benny didn't know the protocol, but it looked like someone was improvising, playing fast and loose with the rules, and he'd heard the people who ran the Hilltop had a lot of pull.

Benny wasn't sure how good an idea this had been. He'd figured he could call in some markers, get Connie released on her own recognizance, and they'd all be home in time for supper, but it turned out to be hard enough just getting into the jail without pulling rank. If he hadn't been law, they would have shined him off with some cock-and-bull story about how they'd lost her paperwork, or she was still in transit, or they'd never even heard of her.

The girls were in an interview room with a matron keeping an eye on them. The matron had eyes like zinc, and the girls looked small and scared. Benny didn't want Aurora and Angelina to see their mother in prison-issue denims. They were already brittle enough. Connie was in lockdown, no outside calls, no contact with misdemeanor arrest prisoners in the yard or the detention tanks. Benny didn't get it, or like it much.

Connie Navarro was being held in quarantine like she'd kidnapped the Lindbergh baby.

D. D. Chavez showed up at three o'clock. Benny didn't waste time

with small talk. He needed a sympathetic judge.

"Who's on the bench for Superior Court?" he asked Chavez.

"Andy Vigil," D. D. said.

"Good. He owes me one." Benny told the lawyer what he had in mind.

In the general's mind, security considerations were uppermost. The program couldn't be compromised under any circumstances, and even the smallest leak might prove disastrous. Early on, in fact, Groves had wanted the scientists commissioned so they'd be subject to military discipline and Oppenheimer had warmed to the idea, but they'd run into resistance and had to drop it.

Groves respected his unruly charges by and large, but he sometimes wished they could see the bigger picture. Of course, they couldn't because he couldn't afford to let them. Compartmentalization was the only way he could keep all the balls in the air and at the same time keep the enormous scope of the project a secret.

For all his good points, tenacity and engineering skills and a head for details, qualities that had recommended him for the assignment, Groves was, unfortunately, thin-skinned. Physicists could be patronizing. He was thinking of that son of a bitch Leo Szilard. Groves would have liked nothing better than to drop him down a well. In all fairness, Groves had to admit that without Szilard the atom project probably wouldn't even exist, but Groves wasn't a man to shrug off a

slight. Szilard's condescension in Chicago had stung him. He was the guy who'd built the Pentagon, for Christ's sake. He didn't have to get in a pissing contest with some self-important prima donna.

And in the meantime there was Werner Heisenberg in Berlin. Intelligence indicated the Germans hadn't even built a reactor pile yet—they were still horsing around with heavy water—but there was no hard evidence either way. Heisenberg was one of the three or four best theoretical physicists in the world, and unlike the others, who were working for the Allies, Heisenberg was working for Hitler. That was the spur, really. A lot of the people on Oppenheimer's team were German Jews, refugees from the Nazis. They knew it was a race against the clock, that if Hitler got the atom bomb the consequences were unthinkable. Maybe there was no German version of the Manhattan Project, but they couldn't take that chance. The gadget they were building was more than a tactical advantage, or even a weapon to win the war.

They had to deny it to Hitler or risk slavery, death, all the inhuman terror that would daily be visited on them in a world of Nazi victory bought with atomic blackmail.

And now this other thing, ye gods. As if he didn't have enough on his plate. You had to nursemaid these bigdomes every step of the way. Pencil-necked geeks. It was a wonder they had sense enough to use toilet paper after they went to the can.

God love 'em, Groves thought.

Even a wallflower like poor, plain Betty Mulgrew, as hard-favored as a tree stump. What on earth had gotten into Herman? he wondered. It didn't matter what kind of fences you put up, or how you tried to contain their energies and emotions. Sooner or later you reached that critical mass, the same principle as a fission bomb, and you got detonation. All you needed was the proper catalyst.

Judge Vigil came through, and Connie was paroled in Benny's custody. She sat between the girls on the drive back to Española, the four of them crowded together on the pickup's bench seat. Benny handed Connie his makings, and she rolled them both a cigarette. They wound the windows down and smoked. He was being careful not to quiz her, and the girls inhibited the kind of conversation they both knew they had to have. Angelina and Aurora seemed subdued, as if they were somehow at fault for what had happened.

He dropped Connie and her daughters off at their house and went home to dinner.

It was dusk, the sun down below the rim of the Jemez, and the sky, as bright and metallic as a mirror during the day, was streaking now with cirrus as the upper air began to cool. The copper light from behind the mountains reflected off the clouds, turning them iridescent. On top they were pewter-colored, like a bruise, and their undersides were gilded bronze. The light thickened, and the colors got deeper and more saturated, saffron and scarlet,

purple edged in charcoal. Benny Salvador had been watching the high desert skies all his life, day-break and sunsets, the polished blue of noon, nights filled with stars, cold winter mornings dry and tight, approaching summer storms. He'd seen moonrise over thunderheads, lightning playing against the horizon, and the dark cumulus boiling sluggishly, slithering like oil, while the moon climbed past it into a high, cloudless sky. He was always touched by astonishment, as if he'd been shown the hidden face of God.

Benny and his wife lived down by the Rio Grande in an adobe *casita* shaded by the big cottonwoods that grew along the banks. The trees had been there when Benny's grandfather Isidro had built the little house. The old man had shaped the bricks in a mold and let them dry in the sun and then laid them in a double course, with an air space in between. The walls were two feet thick, and they kept the little house cool in the heat of summer and cosy during the winter months.

Benny parked his truck on the packed earth next to the kitchen garden and climbed out. A pair of swallows darted out of the cottonwoods and skipped off downriver, their flight erratic as they zig-zagged after insects rising off the surface of the water.

Benny glanced around for bats, another twilight hunter, as he crossed the yard to the kitchen door. He tapped lightly on the screen door although of course Teresa had heard him pull up in the

truck. "Señora Salvador?" he inquired.

"Good evening, Sheriff Salvador," she replied gravely.

He knocked the dust off his boots and removed his hat as he stepped inside. Their relationship was formal because they chose to have it so. The marriage had been arranged, and neither had questioned the arrangement. It was thirty years now, and they remained satisfied with it. She understood the necessities of being a lawman's wife.

Once his horse had come home without him, the saddle covered in blood. She'd gone out in the buckboard to find him. He was lying under a cholla with three bullets in him, and she'd got him home, gone for the doctor, and brought him back to life.

Their regret was that they had no children. One had been stillborn, the second had died when she was three days old. The babies were buried under the cottonwoods on the riverbank. Teresa still went and spoke to them every day in the early morning when the air was sweet and the water chuckled quietly in the gravel.

"How was your afternoon?" she asked him.

"Frustrating," he said.

"Connie Navarro?"

"I took her home."

She nodded.

"I told her I'd be back later, after supper, when she's put the girls to bed."

"I'll come with you."

He didn't argue. Connie might open up to Teresa, tell her things

she'd be less likely to tell a man. Herman Mulgrew had been shot dead with his own gun, a .32 Colt pocket pistol. One bullet, at close range. Benny didn't think Connie Navarro would have killed somebody, even a mathematician, without good reason.

The meeting got off to a bad start.

"What do we know about this beaner sheriff?" O'Brien asked. He was the senior FBI agent.

The state police captain was a career man named Johnny Lee Montoya. If he took exception to O'Brien's characterization, he didn't show it. "Benny Salvador? He's been around since God was a boy, and he's still got some of the bark on. Used to run with Elfego Baca, matter of fact. Don't think you can write him off as some hayseed hip-deep in sheep dip."

O'Brien had started rummaging through his mental filing cabinets at the mention of el Gato and had obviously drawn a blank. "Is he likely to give us trouble?" he asked.

"Depends what you mean by that," Captain Montoya said. "He won't sit still for being buffaloeed."

"I'm not taking a lot of guff from some taco-bender."

Montoya wondered if O'Brien were deliberately trying to get his goat, but he figured the guy was just oblivious.

"He sprung that Navarro dame," O'Brien said, irritated.

O'Brien seemed to be taking this personally. Montoya didn't know why the FBI agent was getting so exercised. He pointed out that Benny was only taking care of his own.

"You people don't seem to realize we're talking about something that's vital to the war effort," said O'Brien.

That was an insult Montoya decided he didn't have to swallow. He had two boys in the service, one on convoy duty out in the North Atlantic, the other with Mark Clark in Italy. "Did I hear you right?" he asked, tightly, the anger thick in his voice if you were listening for it.

"We're all on the same team, captain," one of the other FBI men said. "Special Agent O'Brien's just blowing off steam."

O'Brien shot the guy a look that would have scratched glass and reached for the pack of Camels on his desk.

"Okay, so maybe I'm playing devil's advocate, here," Johnny Lee said. "Benny's liable to go along, you give him a reason."

"Such as?" the third FBI agent asked him.

"Such as why he should back off. Connie Navarro's related to his wife. Plus she's a constituent. He's got an interest. And that's all he's got at the moment, but if you start throwing your weight around, he'll get his back up."

"Why do we care?" O'Brien lighted a smoke.

Johnny Lee looked at him. "Why would you want to irritate the locals?" he asked in return, trying not to lose patience again. O'Brien was the worst kind of thick-headed Fed.

"That's what we've got you for, Captain Montoya," one of the other agents said. "You're supposed to be keeping the local *rurales* in line."

Montoya wanted to explain, for the umpteenth time, that this wasn't Mexico, that some Latinos of his generation didn't even speak Spanish, and that his people had settled the upper Rio Grande sixty years before Plymouth Rock. Three hundred years, if you were counting, before any potato-eating bog Irish O'Briens had jumped on a coffin ship for America. But he held his tongue. What was the point? These guys from Washington didn't care one way or the other. It was all the sticks as far as they were concerned, and Montoya was as big a hick as Benny Salvador.

He shrugged. "I'll try to take care of it," he told the FBI agents, which was what they wanted to hear.

By the end of the briefing Johnny Lee Montoya realized the FBI didn't have any better idea of what was actually going on at Site Y than he did, but they felt they'd been awarded the baton and they were going to follow the procedures, like good Germans. Johnny Lee had also decided he was going to tell Rubén Salvador as much as he knew.

They were sitting at Connie's kitchen table drinking coffee. It was very good coffee. Connie had access to the PX up on the mesa, and science personnel at Los Alamos weren't subject to rationing. Actually, she explained, the domestic help sometimes did the shopping, with a note and a grocery list from whoever they worked for, but they weren't supposed to buy anything for their own use because the army was afraid they'd sell it on the blackmarket. It was one of the

perks of the job that you could add an extra pound of coffee or some real butter to the list and take it home with you. The MP's turned a blind eye.

Oh, it was like a little town, she told them. They had the PX and a post office and an elementary school, a movie theater and a bowling alley. There were the fences and guard posts, of course, but inside there was some pretense of a normal life and they made you feel at home. Not any more, she added ruefully.

Teresa glanced at her husband. "Benny, why don't you check on the girls?" she suggested.

It was a small frame bungalow, without much privacy. The girls were right down the hall. It was past nine o'clock, and they should have been asleep. Benny peeked into the bedroom. Aurora was balled up under the covers, her fist in her mouth, her hair all pushed around, flattened by the pillow, her breathing soft and regular. Angelina wasn't even pretending to be asleep. Her eyes were wide and dark, looking up at Benny in the doorway.

He stepped into the room and crouched down next to the bed. "What's the matter, honey?" he asked. "Can't sleep?"

"Dad isn't here to protect her," Angelina whispered.

Did she mean her mother or her sister, Benny wondered. He felt awkward, trying to maneuver a frightened little girl into saying something he might regret hearing, an admission that could put her mother in jail. "You're safe now,

sweetheart," he said. "We won't let anything happen to you."

She looked skeptical, but he had no way of knowing whether she didn't believe him, knew it was an empty promise, or if her distrust ran deeper: she discounted what he said because he was a grownup, excluded by definition from her frame of reference. Benny's experience of children was haphazard.

"I know you're worried about your mom," he told her. "I'll see if I can't fix things."

"It's not her fault," Angelina said, in a very small voice. "She didn't know any better."

Benny was sure, when she said it, that this time she meant Connie, but afterwards, driving home in the truck, he had second thoughts. He asked Teresa what she'd found out.

"Something bad happened, Benny," she said. "But she won't tell me what it was. She seems resigned, as if whatever's going to come of this, it's out of her hands now."

"It is if she won't speak up in her own defense."

"She's hiding something," Teresa said.

"What if this guy Mulgrew tried to rape her?" he asked.

Teresa shook her head. "I don't think so. I'd be angry and ashamed. Connie's not. She's—"

Benny glanced over at her. "She's what?" he asked.

"Distant," Teresa said finally.

Benny had noticed that about Connie himself.

"That happens to people," he said. "Turning inward, blaming yourself."

"No, it's not the same," she told

him. "She's not pretending it didn't happen. She's already past that."

"You mean she's fatalistic."

"I mean that she's made a decision," Teresa said. "She might not be comfortable with the consequences, but she realizes there's no point in going over it time and again."

"You're reading a lot into this."

"She asked me if we'd look after the girls."

Benny took a deep breath. He felt a little short of oxygen. "Okay," he said, after a space. "I might need a minute to get used to the idea, but I'm guessing you told her yes."

"Benny, what if Victor doesn't come back from the Pacific?" she asked. "God forbid. And their mother in prison?"

He nodded. "I didn't say I didn't like it, I just said I had to get used to it," he told her, smiling. "You really think we're up to the challenge?"

"They're sweet kids," Teresa said. "It's going to be tough on them, their father away, a murder trial."

"It already is," Benny said. He told Teresa what Angelina had said to him. "I get the feeling she's holding herself responsible," he added. "That's a hell of a thing. I don't know if she saw it, but here's a guy dead, with her mom's head in the noose. Too much weight for an eleven-year-old to carry."

Teresa was quiet for a moment. "The girls were alone in the house with that Mr. Mulgrew," she said, thoughtfully. "Connie was shopping at the PX."

"So she *did* tell you something."

"Nothing she thought was important."

"There's a Mrs. Mulgrew, right?"

"Betty's her name. She wasn't home. Bridge club or something, every Saturday afternoon."

Benny didn't much want to put his thoughts into words. He knew his wife felt the same way, but it was as if they were in a room with a large bear sitting on the sofa and neither one of them wanted to call attention to it in case the bear would just decide to get up and leave of its own accord.

"*Cabrón*," Teresa murmured to herself. Bastard. She wasn't usually given to vulgar language.

It was reason enough for Connie to have shot Herman Mulgrew without hesitation, Benny thought, if she'd come back with the groceries, maybe earlier than he expected, and surprised him in the act of feeling up Aurora or Angelina. And it was reason for her to keep silent as well. In order to make a case for the defense, her attorney would have to put one or both of the girls on the witness stand, subject to cross-examination, to say out loud what had happened to them. But more than sparing her daughters public humiliation, Benny suspected, Connie wanted to save them from having to repeat the experience of that afternoon in the theater of their imagination.

"What if nobody believes them?" his wife asked him.

The testimony of two terrified children, confused by something they didn't understand? Teresa was right to be afraid for them, Benny knew.

And so was Connie.

Had she really played her hand

so badly? Betty Mulgrew wondered.

A wallflower, always the last girl asked to dance, but she'd been fun, made everybody laugh, one of the gang. She was intelligent although she hadn't always let on how intelligent she was. Intelligent women scared men off. They didn't like being shown up. She'd learned that the hard way. Even at college, where you'd think an agile mind would be prized, she discovered otherwise. But later on, after grad school, she found out she didn't have to hide her light under a bushel any more. At the University of Chicago her fellowship brought her into contact with a different hierarchy, European émigrés in flight from Hitler, and it created a different set of circumstances for her. Enrico Fermi was shuttling back and forth from Columbia to the Met Lab in Chicago, and Betty was recruited to help with the calculations. Herman Mulgrew came on board as team leader, fussy and prim, the classic anal-retentive, she had thought at first.

But she warmed to him by degrees. He respected her mind, for one thing. Herman wasn't intimidated by a bony woman with brains. They understood each other's detachment. Herman the math whiz, a kid who had never gone out for sports, bookish, unpopular in high school, always on the outside looking in. Betty recognized the symptoms. She knew loneliness firsthand. It had a gravitational pull, and they were two people in eccentric orbits.

Marriage had seemed like res-

cue, at least to Betty. Her sexual hunger went unsatisfied, but it was a meeting of equals in other respects. They were companions, helpmates, fellow travelers. Later on she'd remember something her friend Jeremy Banks had said. Sweet, fey Jeremy, for whom her ungainly body wasn't a problem, since his preferences didn't lean to women anyway. What was the word he'd used? A "beard," that was it. An alibi. Somebody who made it appear to the world that you were straight as a die. She knew now that she was Herman's beard, and in more ways than one, but oddly enough, she didn't resent it. Or not while he was alive.

Fellow travelers. That was the secret joke they shared. Outsiders both, their sympathies went out to the powerless, the others who'd been excluded from the head table. Like a good many of his contemporaries Herman had flirted with Communism in his college days. It was a stage they went through. Betty had signed on to a bunch of lefty lost causes back then—the war in Spain, the United Mine Workers, the Scottsboro boys.

It was all in their FBI file, labeled premature anti-Fascist activity but written off as youthful indiscretion. The FBI background investigation indicated that Herman's membership in the Party had lapsed and that Betty was now completely occupied by her work. Both of them contributed materially to the war effort. Nobody realized that Betty and Herman hadn't outgrown their early flirtation. They'd simply gone underground

on instructions from their Soviet handler.

And now Herman was dead. You could call it an accident, an accident waiting to happen perhaps, or plain bad luck. Either way, Betty felt trapped. Her disillusion had come back to haunt her. Herman hadn't rescued her after all, and the promise of an international Socialist brotherhood was small comfort. She'd been courted by two suitors and betrayed by both of them.

She recalled a line in Rilke, or was it one of the French lyric poets? That every love affair is a mystery where we seek not only to determine who is guilty, but to define the crime.

Two worlds were converging more quickly than either anticipated. D. D. Chavez consulted Benny.

"Plead her to manslaughter," Chavez said. "That way it never goes to trial and Connie gets off with a lesser sentence."

Benny had already talked to Captain Montoya of the state police. "The people up there on the mesa want to avoid any more embarrassment," he said. "Is that the best they can offer?"

"What are you getting at?" the lawyer inquired.

"How come Herman Mulgrew had a gun?" Benny asked him. "The security over at Los Alamos is supposed to be pretty tight."

Chavez nodded. "I wondered about that," he said.

"The army doesn't want to open a can of worms," Benny said. "They want to close the books on this, put it to sleep."

"So you figure to raise some dust, ask questions they don't want to answer?"

"Wouldn't hurt."

"Well, the gun can probably be explained. The guy might have fishing rods in his closet, too. I'd say you needed better leverage than that to get the charges reduced."

"How about if Herman Mulgrew was a child molester?"

D. D. blinked in surprise. "Jesus God, Benny," he said, his face going slack. "Can you back that up?"

Benny told him how Teresa felt, and why he thought so, too.

"That's awful thin," Chavez said. "If we put Connie on the stand, will she testify to it?"

"Not a chance," Benny told him. "She knows you'd have to put the girls on, too, and she won't let that happen. Not to mention, if it's true, and you get the girls to testify, what if the jury doesn't buy it?"

"You've put them through the wringer for nothing. Connie is damned if she does and damned if she doesn't."

"I'm thinking the army doesn't have to know that, though," Benny said. "We give them a hint of what we've got, they'll run for cover. Dig themselves a foxhole and pull it in after."

"You know anything about this guy Groves, the general in charge up there? He's supposed to bend nickels with his teeth."

"I don't remember I ever ticked off a general," Benny smiled. "Ticked off a judge or two. Still, generals don't like bad press any more than the rest of us."

"I mean, what you're suggesting

is we blackmail the army," Chavez said, "and I don't think this general's a dope. He'll be gunning for us, we try to make him look bad."

"We're not trying to make him look bad," Benny said. "What we're trying to do is *keep* him from looking bad."

"That's a fine line there," Chavez said. "I hope General Groves appreciates the distinction."

"What I hope General Groves appreciates isn't just keeping his name out of the papers," Benny said. "Whether we can prove Herman Mulgrew was a pervert is beside the point. Groves can do his own dirty laundry. I just want to get Connie off the hook. Was it justifiable homicide? Let him make the call."

"I think you're putting a rope around your neck," D. D. told him.

"Maybe so," Benny said. "My grandfather Isidro used to say that bacon's not the only thing cured by hanging."

The general was on the warpath again. His exasperation was predictable enough to his immediate staff. The "longhairs," as Groves referred to his scientific charges, had come up against a stumbling block with the plutonium manufactured at Hanford. It was contaminated with an active isotope that made it unstable. An untried method called implosion was being discussed, but the variables were daunting. The British team, just arrived, was working on the problem. One of the newcomers, a German émigré named Klaus Fuchs, had developed some ideas using lenses to focus

the explosion inward. But they couldn't trust to theory. They had to test it. The search was on for a suitable site, one that Oppenheimer had chosen to name Trinity.

In the middle of this, Major Peer de Silva, chief intelligence officer at Los Alamos, had gone into the general's office and been closeted there twenty-five minutes by the clock.

The expected volcanic eruption never came. Groves didn't even raise his voice. When the major came out of the office, his face was pinched, but it wasn't the face of a man who'd been thwarted. It was the face of determination.

Groves unwrapped a cigar and leaned back in his chair, putting his thoughts in order. He'd already authorized Major de Silva to tear the Mulgrew bungalow apart. Anything they found, anything that supported the Navarro woman's story, would be made available to the defense. Groves wouldn't tolerate some sex maniac on his watch. If there were even a glimmer of truth to it, he'd plow it up, root and branch, and sow the ground with salt. He had to respect this man Salvador, a hick sheriff but with a chip on his shoulder, the bit between his teeth, and no quarter asked or given. He thought maybe he'd like to meet him.

Two bulldogs facing off in a narrow alley, neither giving way.

"I can't do it," Connie said.

"What do you mean, you can't do it?" Benny asked her. They were alone in her kitchen. The girls were at school.

"I just can't, Benny." Her face was so sad he thought his own heart would break. It was late morning.

He'd explained the deal. The evidence that Herman and Betty Mulgrew were spies, the pilfered documents, the codebooks under the loose floorboards in the kitchen, the radio equipment hidden in the crawlspace above the bedroom. All of it so amateurish, as if they wanted to get caught. Connie's end of the bargain was nothing. She didn't have to go to court, she only had to tell the army major what had happened. Mulgrew was dead, and good riddance to bad rubbish. Groves was giving her a walk.

"Just between us, Benny," she said. "Hand on your heart."

He wasn't sure what he was being required to do. "Teresa?" he asked. He couldn't even explain it to his wife?

"Promise me," Connie said. "Just the two of us."

He knew she had to tell somebody. Neither one of them had the slightest idea what Groves was hiding, up on the mesa. They were feeling around in the dark, contaminated by secrets. Connie's secret, at least, was there for the taking. All he had to do was acquiesce in her solitude, her despair. He nodded.

"I wasn't there," she began.

"Okay," he said.

"The girls were there."

He didn't interrupt.

"He loved watching them," she said. "I think it might have reminded him of a time when he was untarnished, too."

Benny didn't understand why

she was giving Herman the benefit of the doubt.

"He never intended to do them any harm," Connie said. "And the girls liked him. He was Mr. Silly, that's what they said."

Where was this going? Benny was at a loss.

"The girls were playing hide-and-seek. Aurora hid in a closet, but since Angelina knew all her hiding places, she got inside a new place, at the back, behind the loose paneling."

Benny began to see. A false wall. Espionage gimmicks concealed in the woodwork. Carelessness on Herman's part.

"Herman found her. He shook her and yelled at her. He was so angry, and Angelina was so afraid for her."

She didn't know any better, that's what Angelina had told Benny. It wasn't her fault. Daddy's not here to protect her.

He asked Connie how her daughters had known about the gun.

"It was Angelina. She'd seen it in his desk, but she never told on him. She knew Herman only wanted them to be safe."

Safe, he thought. A frightened little girl killed a silly, frightened man to keep her sister safe.

"It was all a misunderstanding," Connie said.

"I misunderstood it from the first," Benny admitted.

"I can't tell them Angelina shot Herman," she said.

Benny wasn't so sure about that, but he said nothing.

"They were both innocent," she said. She looked at him with dry

eyes. "Do you see? Nobody meant for it to happen. He was foolish, not wicked. Not for a moment. Not wicked."

No, not intentionally, Benny understood. It was the innocent who did the most damage. It was the innocent you picked up after, in the end.

Connie didn't go to prison. And her husband came home when the war was over. But that was later. While they all waited for it to end, they made accommodations. Connie got a job in Albuquerque with the Corps of Engineers, arranged by Leslie Groves. She came home on weekends, but during the week Angelina and Aurora stayed with Benny and Teresa. The girls played under the cottonwoods next to the house Benny's grandfather had built down by the river, and Teresa stopped visiting her babies' graves every morning. Benny kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the nightmares and the crying jags, or inexplicable fits of temper, but the sisters seemed to bounce back, resilient as puppies. He noticed that Angelina was sometimes more pensive than most girls her age, but she'd always been a thoughtful child, studying on the whys and wherefores. Aurora was sunnier, and untroubled. After a while Benny decided he shouldn't fret about it so much.

It was July, the cicadas humming. Benny was staking tomatoes in the kitchen garden. Sundays were his day for working around the house. Connie and Teresa had taken the girls to Mass. The motor-

pool car bumped down the dirt driveway, swaying on its shock absorbers. It was an army green Ford with serial numbers stenciled on both doors. Benny saw no passenger, just a driver. He parked next to Benny's truck and got out.

He was heavysset and rumped, his shirt stuck to his spine from the heat of the car seat. His khakis were unbuttoned at the neck, but the stars on his collar caught the light and Benny knew who it was. They'd never met before.

Benny straightened up, and Groves walked over. The two men shook hands.

"Connie appreciates your getting her that position in Albuquerque," Benny told him.

Groves nodded. "Least I could do under the circumstances. Fine woman, Mrs. Navarro." He looked off across the river.

Benny realized Groves felt awkward for some reason. "Come in the house," he said. "I can offer you beer, or iced tea."

"A beer sounds fine," the general said.

It was cool inside the adobe. Benny got two beers out of the icebox and opened them. Groves turned down a glass, and the two of them drank from the bottle.

"You might want to take a ride," Groves remarked.

Benny waited politely.

"Beginning of next week, say. Sunday night, early Monday. You can get up the back side of Sandia Peak on the fire roads. You'd want to be there by five in the morning. Watch the southern horizon."

South was the Alamogordo

Bombing Range and the Jornada del Muerto. Maybe this was what all the secrecy was about. The war in Europe had been over for two months, and now they just had to beat the Japs. It sounded to Benny like Groves had something up his sleeve.

"This is strictly between the two of us," Groves said. "No loose talk."

Benny nodded.

"Take some sunglasses," the general added.

Why would he need sunglasses at night, Benny wondered.

Groves took another pull on his beer. "You did me a service," he said. "That business with the Mulgrews. The damn Commies are champing at the bit, now they've beaten the Germans. We'll be fighting them next, and about time, too."

Benny didn't know where this was leading, and he said so.

Groves smiled, humorlessly. "Well, de Silva figures Herman and Betty were nothing but a pair of patsies," he said.

De Silva was the officer running counterintelligence at Los Alamos, Benny remembered. "I don't follow you," he said.

"You know how you salt a worthless mine?" Groves asked him. "Scatter real gold around, make it look like a rich strike?"

"You think the Mulgrews were too easy to catch?"

Groves nodded. "Misdirection," he said.

"I don't mean you any disrespect, sir, but maybe you and Major de Silva are beating a dead horse. Are the Russians really trying to plant subversives everywhere?"

Groves gave him a look that Benny took to mean the general thought he was hopelessly naive.

"Okay," Benny said. "I guess what I'm asking is how come it took two little girls to expose the Mulgrews? That was an accident, not something you could count on. If you wanted them to call attention to themselves, you'd come up with a better way than kids playing hide-and-seek."

"No, that's the beauty of it," Groves said. "There wasn't any timetable. They were bound to get caught sooner or later. They weren't professionals. They were dilettantes. A couple of dupes. Expendable. Betty's looking at some hard time."

"So they throw the Mulgrews to the wolves, everybody pats each other on the back, things go back to normal, and meanwhile, your real spy is still passing secrets to the Russians."

"Pretty much," Groves said. "Of course, you could be right about me and I'm loopy, seeing secret agents under the bed."

Benny didn't think Groves expected him to agree.

"I have to get back," the general said. "Something always throws a monkey wrench into things at the last minute, screws up your schedule. Thanks for the beer, sheriff."

"Sure," Benny said.

Groves paused in the doorway. "Nice place you've got," he remarked, looking out toward the cottonwoods. "Your people been here a long time?"

"My grandfather picked this spot," Benny told him.

"I was thinking of your, uh, stock. Your forebears."

"My mother's side of the family say it's been four hundred years, give or take," Benny said.

"Is that right? I'll be damned." If he hadn't known better, Benny might've thought General Groves was dragging his feet, reluctant to go. "It was Oppenheimer who talked me into coming out to New Mexico in the first place, you know. He'd fallen in love with the desert. The primitive landscape. Odd duck, Oppy. He's got a poetic streak."

So did the general, although he seemed somewhat embarrassed by it, Benny thought.

Groves came to himself abruptly, sketched a quick wave, and walked out to his car, his back straight.

Benny watched him drive away. He thought he might take Groves up on his invitation, go down to Sandia, see what there was to see in the dead of night, with sunglasses.

Maybe he'd gain some flash of insight.

The other thing, well. Benny wasn't so sure. Groves might simply have Reds on the brain. One of those people who took themselves far too seriously. He didn't think Groves was utterly self-involved, but the man had a sense of doom, as if the earth were about to tip off its axis, and Benny didn't figure that was ready to happen, not just yet.

He went back out in the hot sun to work on his tomatoes.

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FICTION

The Petrosian Principles

Neil A. Schofield



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 2/01

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I am sitting on my balcony, in the sun. A room-service waiter has just laid out lunch on the table. Beside my plate is *The Ring*, glinting beautifully in the sunlight. I sip my wine and stare at it and think how magnificent it is. But I also wonder just how on earth they worked the whole thing.

Call me a snob if you like, lots of people do, but I've always liked Cannes. I like it especially when it is taking a deep breath after the horrid feeding frenzy of the film festival. I like it because it seems to take a great gulp of air, the town empties itself like a toilet, and the hotel and restaurant people have at least time to treat you like clients, whereas in the high season they haven't time to spit on you, much as they'd like to. Harry liked Cannes, too. One of his Principles was "All Work And No Play . . ." He used to rub his hands together and say, "Come on, then, old Bella, how about a spot of R and R? Cannes, Nice, and Bumpsadaisy."

Yes. Well, you can see there was a bit of a downside to life with Harry. Bless him. I mustn't speak ill of him now he can't answer back.

We always stayed at the Beaumarchais. I know it isn't the Carlton or the Martinez. But what it is is quiet and well-behaved. It is set in a little street not far from the Palais de Congrès, and it is cool and private and not at all cheap. It had always pleased us both. Me because of the quiet and Harry for its proximity to the Croisette, where he used to wander and take the air and think about work. Even in

Cannes he was always thinking about work, was Harry.

It's an old hotel. When I say old, I mean the 1920's, the heyday of the Côte d'Azur. It's gone a little downhill since then, some might say, lost a little of its glamour. But the lobby is still cool and fragrant, and the rooms are still high-ceilinged and furnished in that massive unforgiving French style. None of your Formica Inn here. You try to shift even the bedside table and it's *bonjour tristesse* as they say.

So the Beaumarchais is where I came two weeks ago to take a bit of a breather after everything that had happened because they had always been nice to us and I needed a lot of nice. I can tell you when I stepped out of that British Airways jet—well, I've always said give me a whiff of that warm air, scented with those flowers I can never remember the names of, and I'm putty in your hands. You can do what you like with me.

When the taxi screeched to a spine-chilling halt in the rue des Puits, my bags were immediately seized and carried inside at great speed. Jean-Marie, who is the manager and I suspect (but you can *never* tell down here) part owner, swept forward through the cool marbled air to greet me. He is youngish and small and round and permanently in need of a shave though I put that down to the climate and his ancestry rather than laziness. Whatever, he has always seemed to me the model of a good hotelier: correct but firm with awkward guests, correct but never obsequious with the good ones like Harry and me.

"For example, Madame Petrosian!" He speaks rather good English, but he has that common habit of translating word for word from the French. "What a happiness!—I mean, I am ravished to see you again!" He pressed my hand to his lips as well he might, since said hand has been the vehicle of many a handsome *pourboire*.

"And Monsieur Petrosian? Will we, you know, have the grand pleasure . . ."

Then I had to break it to him that, alas no, Monsieur Petrosian, after a long and painful struggle, had left us to go to another place. Jean-Marie reeled back. He was shocked, he said, and desolated. He cried, he added, for my suffering.

I didn't doubt it for a moment, but I sensed that he also cried for the loss of a valued client. I was looking around. Even for the lowish season, the Beaumarchais seemed very, very empty. I counted only two others in the lounge area, a young couple conversing intensely and quietly over a drink.

Jean-Marie escorted me to the reception desk as though I were an arriving dowager. Well, I had to admit I looked not half bad. I have always been, as Harry used to say, stately. ("Like the *Queen Elizabeth* you are, old Bella. Magnificent lines.") I had had my hair done before leaving, with ever so slight a tint to set off the silver. I had also deliberately kitted out well, and I was wearing all the baubles. (Harry's firmest Principle was Presentation Is Everything, Old Bella, And Don't You Forget It.) I looked a handsome, well-off forty-fiveish

rather than my—well, never you mind.

Jean-Marie brushed aside the chit of a receptionist, whom I didn't recognize, probably a summer replacement, personally booked me in, and personally gave me my key. Well, so he might, he didn't seem to have much else to do. Like the hotelier he is, he gave me the usual rhubarb about things being slow for the time of year. But he did hear that the Khashoggis, the Thyssens, and the Prince Edwards were awaited with impatience. I said I hoped it kept fine for them. Then I gave him my fat envelope to put in the hotel safe. Harry's Principle was Always Keep Lots Of Cash Safe But Handy. Jean-Marie, being used to my ways, took care of it personally, placing it in a safe deposit box and handing me the key.

As he walked me to the lifts, the young couple, who had been walking enlaced across the lobby while I was checking in, joined us, and Jean-Marie gave them a carefully graded smile and bow, which I took to mean that they were *bon chic bon genre* but no great shakes in the wallet department. They looked a nice enough pair to me. He was tallish, slim (but he might have to work on that twenty years from now), with smooth olive skin, dark crisp hair (of Corsican descent, if I were any judge), and a beautiful smile. She was a little waif of a thing, small-boned, no figure to speak of, not too well-dressed, but with delicate features and dark, beautiful eyes that darted everywhere and anywhere but sooner or later always ended up on him. She

reminded me of Audrey Hepburn. Jean-Marie caught me looking at them and gave me that little moue and a shrug of the eyebrows that betokens lots of sympathy but no concessions and above all no credit.

They left us at the third floor, and Jean-Marie started in again with his multi-adjectival condolences, which I'm afraid I cut short. Some things are best left untalked about. I had no intention of going into unnecessary detail, and besides, it's a short step from giving people gratuitous information to having them turn up one evening at your house with a carful of kids and an aged aunt.

Once in my room and alone, I opened the shutters, which had been closed against the afternoon sun, and took a good deep breath of Cannes air. Then I opened the minibar and took a good deep swallow of gin and tonic. Both of these things did me good. But I wondered how I was going to adjust to Life Without Harry.

I had a long, long nap.

When I went down for dinner that night, it was like coming home. All the staff who had been off for the afternoon were back, and I was able to say hello to Jules-Edouard, the concierge, and to Mauricette, the head receptionist, who I suspect hides a secret sorrow or a bullying mother or both and who gave me a mournful handshake and a small kiss on each cheek. Jean-Marie looked shocked at this, but I was rather touched.

The restaurant at the Beaumarchais is small but good, and a few more guests seemed to have

emerged from the brickwork, among them the young couple, who gave me shy smiles. And I had a superb dinner. A plate of delicious tiny prawns, a *coquilles St. Jacques*, and a wonderful turbot. And a whole bottle of wine. Sinful.

After dinner I swayed up to my room and fell asleep breathing the warm air, without closing the shutters, without putting on my nightdress, and dreaming that everything was just as it had always been. Except for Harry Petrosian.

The next morning after breakfast, which Jean-Marie delivered personally to the room, and after a long and luxurious bath with *everything* in it, I put on my swimming costume and did a twirl in front of the mirror.

"Be honest, Bella," I said, "you're not half bad." And I wasn't. A little too much round the bum perhaps, but upstairs was still firm, my skin is superb, and there are no bags under *my* baby-blue eyes. One of Harry's Principles had always been Keep Yourself Fit.

Of course, the Beaumarchais doesn't have its own beach. But Jean-Marie has some sort of understanding with somebody at the Carlton—probably a brother-in-law thing, I suppose; whenever there's something not too kosher going on in France, you'll usually find there's a brother-in-law lurking in the undergrowth. Sometimes there seem to be more brothers-in-law than there are people.

So, because it wasn't too hot, I went to the beach, was welcomed like a princess, led to my *transat*—which is what we would call a deck-

chair, but you know the French—and a little later was served with a tall technicolor something with umbrellas in it. I settled down with my book. Sun, sea, and Sara Paret-sky. Bliss.

I must have dozed off for a bit, and I woke up with a sensation of chill. The beachboy was putting up a large parasol over me, and on the next chair was the young thing from the hotel. The boy was standing over her grinning at me.

"It is necessary to be careful. The sun is hot, and the little wind can deceive you." I thanked him for his thoughtfulness and offered them both a drink, since it was the least I could do. I know people who would have sat there and watched me fry.

He was Paul and she was Saskia, and I must say they were as nice as they looked. Paul was from the Charente. He said his family was in jewelry—or had been, since it appeared there had been reversals, and I gathered, reading between the lines, that the family business had gone belly-up. His friend Saskia was a different kettle of fish. It didn't surprise me a bit when she said she was from Trieste. There are a lot of goodlooking people from that part of the world, I've noticed, something to do with its being at the junction of all those cultures, I suppose. Harry knew quite a lot of people from those parts, and some of them were really quite beautiful. Mind you, some others were as ugly as a bagful of spanners, but I suppose it can go either way. She spoke five languages, count them, and her ambition was to be an interpreter for the European Union.

But there was a problem with papers. She couldn't even get a *carte de séjour*.

Well, I liked them both, I have to say. A nice young pair very much in love as anyone with half an eye could see and as poor as church-mice.

"We met when we were just teenagers," said Paul, "Our fathers were—business associates? Even then we knew we were destined to be together." He looked at her and she looked at him and that's all you had to see.

Now his father was bust, her father was dead, and they were star-crossed lovers. Paul had come to the South to work for a Monsieur Baudoux, an old jeweler acquaintance of the family, and was earning five-eighths of sod-all. He had even had to sell his car to send Saskia enough money to come to France and take a break from her endless family. I was impressed. A Frenchman who sells his car to pay for a little time with his girl *must* be in love.

And there they were. They couldn't afford to get married on Paul's money, she couldn't get papers to work in France, and all they had was this three weeks in Cannes that he had sold his beloved Alfa Romeo to pay for.

I liked the way they told it. Paul had a lovely, very self-mocking, deprecating humor, which is rare for a Frenchman, and Saskia didn't wallow either.

I asked them over dinner, because it seemed quite natural to eat with them, why the problem with the papers.

"It is a bad situation in France at this moment. There have been too many immigrants in the past, and now the regulations are much more strict. And there was once a problem with Saskia's family," Paul said vaguely. Well, well, I thought, I wonder what that was all about. "Of course there are ways—you understand?—for instance, I know someone in Bordeaux, an old acquaintance of my father but—you know?" He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together and winked. I knew.

I'm pretty hard to satisfy when it comes to choosing friends, but Paul and Saskia pleased me. I liked their matter-of-fact acceptance of things. They didn't whinge or sigh, they simply delighted in each other's company. And they made me laugh, and I made them laugh. I can tell a good story when I put my mind to it, and Harry and I had had enough experiences in our time together to fill a book.

So we got into the habit as natural as anything of going to the same place on the beach every day, they to splash and squeal in the sea, me to read my book, sip a little something, and gaze across that bay, as blue as anything.

On one of these days, when they had returned dripping and giggling from the waves, Paul threw himself down on the sand between the chairs looked at the sky and sighed.

"If it could only be so for a long, long time," he said. It was the first time he had given in to the slightest depression. Saskia jumped on this at once. She wasn't having it. She began to cover him with sand,

digging great handfuls up and dumping them on his torso.

"You want to stay, big boy? Okay, I'll dig you a grave. Come on, Bella, this great crybaby wants to live on the beach like a crab. Make him a hole."

So we covered him with sand. It's been years since I've done that, buried someone in the sand, and it's very good exercise. Saskia winked at me and dug really deep into the sand down to where it was moist.

"An old crab must, you see, be kept wet, Bella. It's important." And she slathered his face with wet sand. We dug down, she and I to get to the water table, both of us scrabbling in the hole we had made. The Carlton beachboys were going to have a bit of a job, I thought. And then, our hands, scrabbling together, found something. We touched it at the same time, I'm sure.

"Hang on, I said, 'what's this?' It felt hard and spiny, and I thought for a moment it must be a crab or something. I took it out. It was caked hard with sand and its outlines were hard to distinguish, but it was unmistakably a ring. A huge oval ring. Saskia sat back.

"What is it?" she said.

"I'm not altogether sure."

Paul sat up. I showed him the object. He took it and rubbed some of the caked sand off.

"One moment," he said, and he got to his feet and ran to the sea. There he crouched down and washed whatever it was in the surf, working it hard in his fingers. Then he came back and sat down.

"I have to inform you, ladies, that together you have discovered the

first diamond mine in the South of France." He showed us, and it made me gasp, I can tell you. It was a huge sort of star-shaped ring, with a huge stone in the center and with five points spiraling out, each encrusted with smaller stones.

Saskia said, "Throw it away. It's rubbish from the market."

Paul looked at her and then at me. I shrugged.

"I don't think we should be too fast to throw it away," he said carefully.

I said, "We ought to hand it in. It must have been reported missing."

"Understand, Bella, please. This thing was so far down in the sand it must have been there for years. No, I think no one is looking for this thing. And I also think it may be quite valuable indeed."

Saskia sat forward now. "You think we should take it."

"Yes, I do. But I would like another opinion." He thought for a bit.

I said, "What about your Monsieur Baudoux?"

Saskia smiled. "Of course! Paul, take it to Monsieur Baudoux. You can tell him it belongs to a friend and you need to know the value. Or something." She tailed off lamely. "Of course, Bella, it was you who found it, so—"

I wasn't having this. I looked at her and said firmly, "We found it together, Saskia, and that's that. Now I think we should fill in this mine-shaft because the beachboys are beginning to give us curious looks." I had also noticed that we were whispering, and there's nothing like whispering to attract attention.

It's very hard not to whisper sometimes, and we were still doing it that night, to the visible annoyance of Jean-Marie. I knew his problem. It was a question of ownership. Suddenly I had passed out of his hands into those of strangers, and he didn't like it. Well, tough.

The next day, just before half-past ten, we stopped on the Croisette opposite the jewelry shop with BAUDOUX writ large above it in elegant script. Just inside the shop a small, extremely elegant man in grey was pulling on a pair of gloves and talking seriously to one of the young ladies.

"There he is," said Paul quietly, "that's Baudoux himself. He leaves to take his coffee. I will talk to him outside."

We watched as the man, who had the look of a fussy little individual, wagged a finger at the young woman and walked slowly out of the shop. He put on his hat and turned to look at the window. He beckoned one of the salespersons and signaled to her, pointing at something in the display. She looked puzzled. He waved his hands in irritated dismissal and started down the Croisette.

Paul said, "Wait here, please." He ran across the road and up to Baudoux. He touched him on the shoulder. Baudoux turned with an annoyed look, then recognized Paul, who drew him into the shade and spoke to him extremely intensely.

Baudoux stopped his remonstrances and listened intently. He seemed to hesitate and shook his head. He looked like a complete swine. I thought Paul must have to

put up with a lot from this detestable little man. Paul spoke even more intently, urging, persuading, and then Baudoux looked down at his feet and finally nodded. Paul passed him a little white packet, which Saskia and I knew was an envelope from the Beaumarchais. Baudoux took it, spoke briefly, and then shook hands.

As Paul crossed the road to us, Baudoux walked back to the shop and entered, taking off his hat and gloves as he did so. One of the saleswomen approached him, anxiously it seemed, but he waved her off and walked towards the back of the shop. Then Paul took our arms and walked us away. He blew out a long breath.

"He has agreed to look at it," he said. "Of course I did not tell him all, simply that it was the property of a relation."

Saskia said, "And when can we expect this odious Baudoux to give us his famous opinion?"

Paul shrugged. "I am afraid that I agreed to meet him over lunch."

Saskia snorted. "And of course it will be we who pay? He is no fool, your Baudoux."

Paul looked helplessly at me. "What could I do?" he said.

"And if it is worth nothing?" said Saskia. "We buy lunch for a little pig who eats like a horse!" We both laughed at her expression.

I patted her hand. "Don't worry, I'll stand lunch. It'll be worth it just to meet the horrible little swine."

In fact the little swine turned out to be not quite so horrible after all.

We were sitting at an outside ta-

ble at the Nid d'Oiseau, having had our appetizers and already tucking into our main courses, when Paul glanced over my shoulder and said, "Here he is." And there he was, Monsieur Baudoux, even smaller and more elegant close to. He took off his hat and shook hands with Paul, who introduced Saskia and me. He took my hand and raised it towards his lips without actually touching them.

"Mes hommages, madame, mademoiselle."

I have to say that his manners were impeccable even if he was sweating rather more than the temperature called for. He offered me his card, a nice creamy white with his name and the address of the shop in raised lettering. The waiter approached directly, and Baudoux briskly ordered an omelette and a glass of white wine. He waited until the waiter had departed and then looked seriously at us.

"I have not much time—an important client arrives in less than half an hour—" he said, "so I will not waste time with small talk."

He looked round the restaurant carefully before going on.

"The ring. I have examined it."

"And?" I asked. He looked at me.

"You will understand, madame, that the house of Baudoux is respected and of an impeccable integrity."

"Yes, I understand that, Monsieur Baudoux," I said.

"And therefore, when something comes into my hands, as sometimes it does, that might—" he searched for the word—"tarnish that repu-

tation, then I must be very careful."

Paul had been sipping his wine. He stopped.

"You mean that the ring—"

"I mean, my little Paul, that I know this ring. Not personally, clearly, but by reputation. Most other jewelers, I think, also know it."

The waiter came out of the restaurant with a tray and served Baudoux with his omelette. Baudoux waited until he had gone again and resumed.

"I have cleaned it properly. The mount is a little corroded, but the stones, as one would expect, are unharmed. If it is as you say and this ring was found in the sand, it has been there for some time."

"How long?" I was consumed with curiosity.

"Approximately four years, ten months, and two days."

I was impressed. Baudoux really knew his business.

Saskia interrupted. "How can you be so precise? Surely you cannot—"

Baudoux smiled. "No, the art of the jeweler is an art, but not such an exact science as that." He produced a large leather wallet, and from it he took two pieces of paper. He slid them across the table. "I must ask you to be discreet. This is no small matter."

Paul took one of the papers, and I took the other. We unfolded them. The first, mine, was a yellowed clipping from the *Nice-Matin* dated the eighth of July 1994. It described in thrilling detail the events of the night before at the Carlton Hotel, which had suffered an appalling

robbery. The suite of Princess Irena Roublov-de Caunes had been pilaged with an unheard-of ferocity, and an entire suite of jewelry stolen that the princess had inherited from her mother, the Grand Duchess Something-or-other—I was getting lost in all that aristocracy. There was a muddy picture of the Croisette and the hotel exterior and an inset photo of the princess, who looked like a real old wreck.

"A little stupid of her to keep her jewels in her room, wasn't it? Without any sort of protection."

He shrugged and allowed himself a severely rationed smile.

"She did have her two bodyguards," he said, "but according to salacious rumor, she and the bodyguards were, how shall I put it, otherwise engaged while the robbery was taking place."

I looked again at the photo of the princess. "Fancy that," I said. "How the other half lives."

"It was established that the thieves escaped by motorboat and rejoined, without doubt, an accomplice who waited for them on the other side of the Italian border."

"Neat," I said. Paul was looking at his piece of paper, an official-looking thing headed *Prefecture des Alpes-Maritimes*. It was evidently a notice, circulated to jewelers, listing and showing the items stolen and also listing, I supposed, dire warnings. Paul pointed. "There," he said. And in the top right-hand corner, next to the photo of a necklace that must have weighed in at a million, was our ring with no sand on it.

"Well, what do you know?" I sat back and took a sip of wine. One of

Harry's principles—Number 36, for all I know—was When In Doubt, Take A Little Alcohol And Wait.

I looked at Baudoux.

"So," I said, "this is part of the loot that the thieves dropped during their getaway?"

He took a first sip of his wine. His omelette, I noticed, had gone completely cold. He smiled.

"It is to be supposed so. The—as you say—the *loot* was never recovered. Now—" he looked at us severely—"understand that in the normal course of events I would have no alternative but to return this ring to the police. I am, after all, a respected member of the profession, and this ring is well known."

I searched his face. "There's a but, isn't there, Monsieur Baudoux?"

"You are very perceptive, Madame—Petrosian? Yes, there is a small but. A tiny but auspicious 'however.' The princess died some two years ago on a trip to her native Russia. Her will is still under contest by every member of her numerous family, who seem to be in the hundreds. The insurance on this ring was paid long ago."

Paul perked up at this. "There will be a reward!"

Baudoux shrugged. "A reward yes, but the formalities will be long and complicated and the reward—comparatively small."

"You have a better idea, don't you?" I said.

"I do. Know that in the course of my business, as every businessman does, I come into contact with collectors. Rich collectors. Specialists if you like, in their way. And as it happens I know of one such who has a

superb private collection of such things."

"You can sell the ring?" I asked. This was a new Baudoux, but, I suspected, the real Baudoux. There was more than a glint of greed in his eye when he turned to me.

"Oh yes, I can sell the ring, Madame Petrosian."

"How much?" Paul asked, leaning forward.

"The stones are extremely fine, especially the central one, which I estimate at some twenty-five carats. But it is the provenance that interests the collector. The ring on the open market in auction would fetch a quarter of a million dollars."

We all gasped. Paul laughed joyously and kissed Saskia, who looked thunderstruck. Baudoux held up a hand.

"*Attention*, it is not on the open market. I think that even for such a superb piece of work as this I could ask no more than one hundred and fifty thousand."

"Still in dollars?" I asked him. I had that lovely warm feeling coming over me. He nodded.

"Of course," he went on, "I would expect a commission."

Of course he would. I waited for the figure.

"Let us say, given the expertise I am bringing to the transaction, twenty percent would not be unreasonable." We all looked at each other and simultaneously nodded.

"It is agreed, then. I shall contact my client this afternoon. I can call on you at your hotel this evening?" he asked Paul. I folded up the article and held it out, but he waved it away. I put it in my bag.

"Of course, monsieur."

"Good. Then I take my leave."

And he was gone just like that, Father Christmas in pearl-grey.

We treated each other to brandies, the three of us, as well we might. It all seemed so unbelievably wonderful. To sit on a beach and dig out a hundred and fifty thousand dollars just like that. If only Harry could have been here. He would have *loved* this.

A potentially spiny problem was very quickly solved by Paul, who insisted over all our protests that Saskia and I would share the treasure. He wanted no part of it.

"After all," he said laughing, "I shall soon be married to a rich woman with papers." They discussed going to Bordeaux, where Paul's father's acquaintance would, under the influence of a generous contribution to his holiday fund, obtain a work permit for Saskia. I looked at them. They were so young. I felt slightly envious. Then I remembered that I was going to be nearly sixty thousand dollars richer, and I felt young, too. Not that I needed the money. Harry had made all the arrangements. But a quick sixty thousand was very, very nice. We walked back to the hotel arm in arm, in the warm air, under the palms, the three of us as happy as sand boys.

That night I was in my room after dinner looking out at the lights of Cannes when Paul rang.

"Baudoux is here," he said. "May we meet in your room?" I said of course we could.

Monsieur Baudoux was just as elegant, though now in a very nice

beige outfit. We sat at the table in my sitting area. Monsieur Baudoux, before speaking, laid a little piece of black velvet on the table and then carefully placed the ring upon it. It looked wonderful. The huge central diamond flashed under the lights. Paul turned it slowly so that the stones on the spiral arms all gleamed in their turn.

Saskia breathed, "It is so beautiful."

Baudoux nodded. "It is indeed, mademoiselle."

I asked, "And your—contact, client, whatever?"

"Oh, there is no problem, Madame Petrosian. As soon as I described what I had before me, he jumped at it as you would say."

"So it is settled?" Paul said.

"Unfortunately he is on his yacht and will not be here for three days. But as soon as he arrives, he will take delivery."

"Three days?" Paul looked disappointed. In his mind he was already married to a Saskia with papers and twenty children.

Baudoux shrugged. "These people. What will you do? They travel to Piraeus, Portofino, Eilat, who knows where? Three days minimum, he told me."

Paul looked at Saskia and me. "Then we wait. There is no problem."

Baudoux raised a finger. "Ah. There is the problem of guardianship."

I said, "Guardianship? Whatever do you mean?"

"Who is going to keep the ring for three days? I must tell you that, given the history of this piece, I can-

not accept to keep it in my shop or in my house for three days. I have had it in my possession now during twelve hours, and I have sweated all that time, I can tell you."

Paul looked puzzled. "I don't see the problem. Then Saskia and I will keep it." Baudoux smiled a very carefully measured smile.

"My young friend, what we have in front of us is very valuable. I recognize that you have worked for me for some time, but I know really very little of you."

Paul flushed, and Saskia gave a shocked little cry.

Paul said, "That's an insult. I—"

I cut him off before he could go any further.

"But what could Paul do with it? Even if he decided to run off with it, he'd need to find a collector. He couldn't sell it just like that."

Baudoux said, "Forgive me, madame, but I am a businessman and therefore cynical by definition. Paul may already have contacts. Who knows?"

This was ridiculous. Paul said, "All right, if you don't trust me, then let Madame Petrosian keep it."

Baudoux considered. "Forgive me once more, madame, and with all the respect that I owe you, but about you I know even less. I do not say that you would do anything in the least dishonest, but—" He let the sentence hang in the air.

Paul got to his feet. "Then what do we do? Throw it back in the sea?"

"Paul, consider," said Baudoux, "We are engaged in a criminal activity. You know that, Madame Petrosian?" I did know, and it was absolutely thrilling. "We have all

known each other for a very short time. There is a lot of money at stake. I do not say that you and madame here are not to be trusted, simply that I would like a little . . ."

"Surety?" I finished the sentence for him. He turned to me.

"Exactly, madame."

Paul said, "But Saskia and I have nothing. You know that. You pay me."

"But *I* have." They all turned to me. Paul looked amazed. Baudoux just looked. "How much?" I asked.

"How much?" said Paul a little wildly. "It is not a question of 'how much,' Bella! You should not have to do this!"

"I want to," I said, "I want to do it. That ring represents a lot for you and Saskia. I don't need the money so much, although I'm not going to turn it down. If all it takes is a deposit, then let me do it. How much?" I said to Baudoux, a little hesitantly. I knew Harry would have had a Principle for this, he had for most situations, but now I was on my own. This was *me*.

He thought for a moment. "Considering the value and your eventual share in it, one hundred thousand francs would be appropriate."

Saskia squealed and buried her face in her hands. "You are a vulture!" shouted Paul, red in the face. "How can you do this to a woman like Madame Petrosian?"

Baudoux spread his hands.

There was a lot more indignant argy-bargy from Paul, but I couldn't see any point in carrying on. I was tired.

"Wait here, all of you. Help yourselves from the bar."

I went down to Reception, where Jean-Marie was making out bills and doing paperwork. I asked him if he had any envelopes and if he would open my safe deposit box. It's just as well I like to carry a bit of cash with me, or we'd have all been in the cart. I prepared everything, put the money in my bag, and gave Jean-Marie the key, which he took with a slightly sulky air. He knew something was up, did Jean-Marie, but he was far too polite to mention it and I was far too intent to care: I had to pop into the toilet before going back up.

In the room they were all as I had left them. I sat down at the table, my bag on my lap.

Paul was still obviously angry. Saskia looked miserable and embarrassed. I looked at the ring and then at Baudoux. I took the money out of my bag, counted it in front of him. Then I replaced it and I sealed the envelope, but something was bothering me. And I let him see that. I said, putting the envelope away, "Monsieur Baudoux, it seems to me that I haven't had any guarantees from you. I know—" I could see his mouth starting to move "—you are a respected businessman and all that. But I've known respected businessmen before."

He shrugged. "If it concerns you, Madame Petrosian, let Paul and his young friend hold your deposit. I can assure you I have no interest in your money except as a gesture of good faith."

I thought about it, then handed the envelope to Paul. He took it with an embarrassed air and stuffed it in his pocket.

Baudoux stood up. "Our business is finished, at least for tonight. May I suggest, madame, that you keep that ring in a secure place."

"Don't worry," I told him. Saskia came to me and gave me a kiss and a warm hug that I knew were heartfelt. Paul kissed me, too. They were both obviously so relieved they could hardly speak. Then they all left together.

As I got ready for bed, I thought about it. "The Ring in the Sand." Whatever next? I know I look innocent, in fact Harry said it was one of my greatest assets, but *really!* That ring looked good, but it was worth around a thousand dollars if I were any judge.

Paul and the girl were exceptional, and the bit with "Baudoux" at the jeweler's was as sweet a piece of timing as I've seen. And I couldn't blame them for not spotting the business with the envelope. Harry used to say I had the best fingers in the business. Well, I should think so, too, the number of times I've worked that one. But this time I had worked solo!

Poor Harry. The last thing he said to me was, "Promise me, old Bella, short or long, you won't try to work a con on your own."

Tell me about it. The one time he had ignored The Principles and tried working without me was the one time it had all come unravelled. And now it was Harry who was currently doing five years in Ford Open Prison, not me. As I fell asleep, I was thinking dreamily that Harry would have been proud of me. I smiled as I thought of them sitting somewhere looking at an

envelope full of that solid Beaumarchais toilet tissue and going mad, *wondering*.

But now, here I am sitting on my balcony with my lunch, the Ring, and the newspaper article in front of me. And now *I'm* wondering.

I did some checking this morning. As I expected, no one at *Nice-Matin* knew anything about a robbery at the Carlton in 1994, nor had they heard of any Princess Irina Roublov-Thingummy. They sounded quite intrigued. Then I went to Baudoux's. The real Monsieur Baudoux, who was not small and elegant at all, in fact quite the reverse, was very pleased to value the ring for me. He told me that it was worth in the region of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars and that he would be only too ravished to make me an offer for such a superb piece.

And now I know what the Ring is. It's a Present.

How do I know? Because like the great ninny I am, I *finally* got round to examining the newspaper article and the photograph of the Carlton. In the bottom right-hand corner you can just see the end of a café terrace. And there he is, at the one table in the shot—tiny, spotty, but when I looked carefully through a magnifying glass borrowed from Jean-Marie, unmistakably Harry Petrosian. I'd know that clever, beaky face anywhere. I should, I've

lived with it for thirty years. I think he's grinning, though I can't be sure. His right hand is curled round a glass, and the thumb is pointing perkily upwards. Harry the Magician. ("Always Do The Unexpected.") I would really *love* to know how they did that.

I say "they" because as I look down from my balcony I can see my other Present strolling across the road towards the hotel: Paul and Saskia. And Baudoux, who actually looks up and gives me a little wave, the cheeky thing. My other Present. My own little team.

Harry the Impossible. Somehow, he reached out of where he is to give me, first of all, a gentle, jokey little test—just to make sure I haven't lost my touch—and then two lovely presents. To tell me that he's sorry, that he loves me and he's still looking after me.

Now I understand why he insisted that I hang onto those lovely 1926 Russian Railway Debentures that Joe Marengi ran up for him. We are going to put something very nice together with those, Paul and Saskia and Baudoux and I. Up in Deauville, perhaps, among the aging, well-heeled, and greedy bourgeoisie, or St. Jean, or even Rimini. ("Never Work Where You Play.")

Then the phone rings, and I begin Life Without Harry. But *not* without The Principles. Because after all, I ask you, what's a life without Principles?

FICTION

SLAVE WITHOUT A MASTER

Brian
Robinson

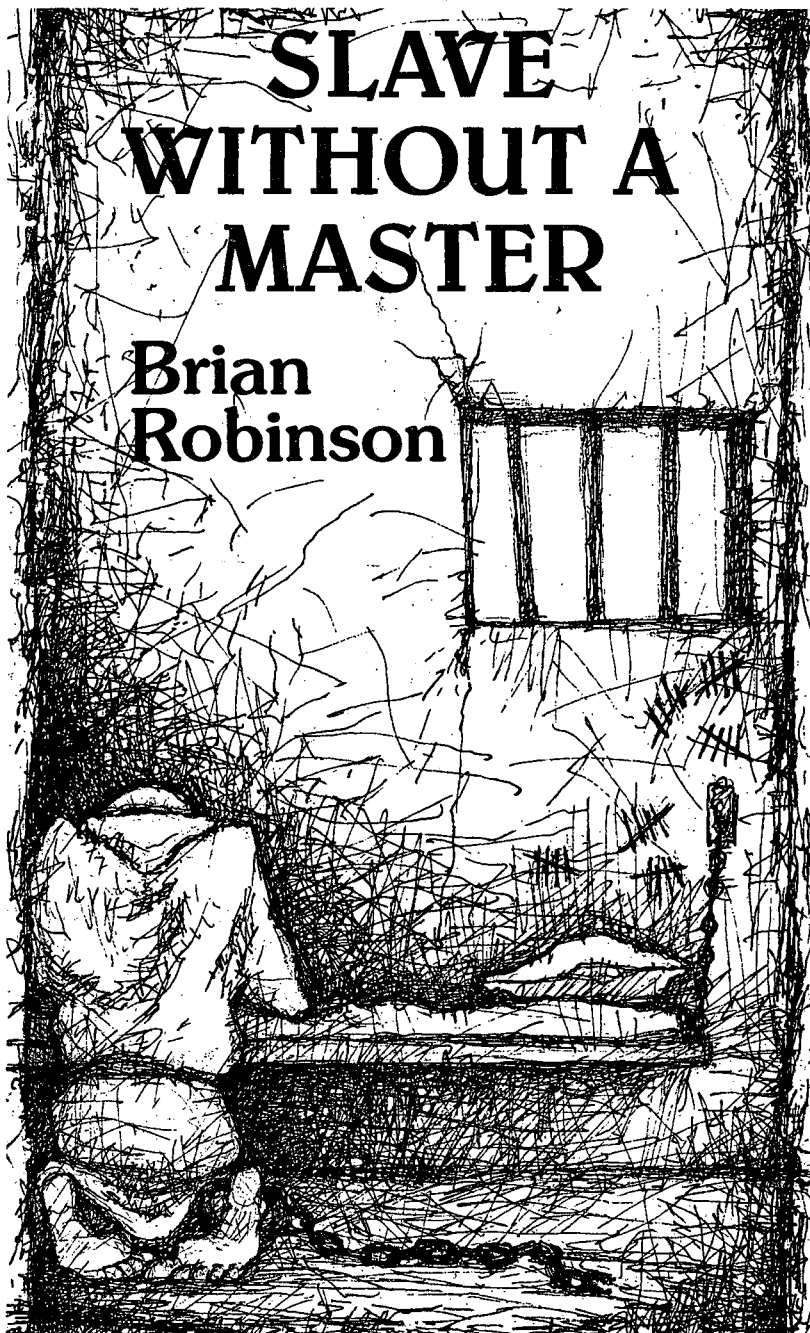


Illustration by Patrick Timmes

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 2/01

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I woke up at three thirty. That was odd. I usually woke up at four in the morning. That was back when I would get up, put on the wide and slightly sour-smelling white robe and the skullcap with the red letters TR, and go out to hoe the fields. Back when I was at Father Holy Truth's Place. I had been out for six months now, but I still woke up early. My therapist had told me it would be the last effect to leave.

I stayed in bed. I thought about what to do. If I turned on a light, they would come in. My brother and the nurses and guards he had hired. They would stay with me all day. They were afraid I would run away. I couldn't go to Father Truth. He was in jail. But there were groups of the Holy Chosen here and there. I could go to one of them. So they watched me.

No lights meant I couldn't read. So I turned on the small TV. It had no cable. It could only pick up local stations. They were fuzzy and wavering, but the sound was good. I could hear what the people said. That was enough. There were too many things that shocked me.

Things had changed since I had been in the Holy Truth Place. Father had always said it was a sinful world out there, sinful and evil, full of temptation, and only those who were apart, who worked hard, could be saved. We had to go out into the world to make money so we could stay isolated, but we would have to be careful. We had our prayer escorts, and those few who were chosen for the street corners and the ones who had to buy supplies

and bullets were chosen for their piety and resistance and were prayed over by Father . . .

I jerked back. Any thoughts of sin would remind me of the camp.

I had waked up in time to hear the story on TV. When the police came later, I knew why.

"... a grisly murder in the small town of Hideville, and police warn of a possible serial killer on the loose." The picture was black and white and unsteady. The anchorman was black and had a serious look on his face. "We now go live to Lydia Carlson at the scene."

Lydia had on a dress with a low neckline and a short skirt. She was in front of a small house that had a nice yard and a fountain.

"Police came to this address in Hideville to check on Mr. Lloyd Nesmith for a parole violation. They were afraid he had skipped town. Instead, they found him dead." A fat man in a policeman's uniform was in the picture now, and I was paying attention. The fat man had a loud braying voice. It sounded a little shaky, like it was his first body.

"At two fifteen," he said, "we went to Mr. Nesmith's house to see if he was still here. My partner noticed the door was open, and we checked it out. He was just inside the door, dead. Strangled." He paused for an unheard question. "No. It was not suicide. He was found on his face on the floor, hands in a praying position, and there was a rope tied from his feet to his hands, wrapped around his neck. Any kind of relaxing would tighten the cord and cut off his air. He might have been like

that for hours before he died.”

Lydia came back. “Police are asking the neighbors for clues, but so far there are no leads. They urge the neighbors to be on the lookout for a possible serial killer, since the way Mr. Nesmith was killed was so planned out and methodical.”

The black man now appeared. “Lydia, could this be related to the Father Truth trial?”

Lydia frowned slightly. “Police are refusing to comment, but it is widely known that Mr. Nesmith was second-in-command at the camp of Martin Van Atter, known as Father Truth, and would have been a star witness for the prosecution. They are looking into possible connections.”

“Thank you, Lydia. Lydia Carlson, live from Hideville.” I turned the TV off.

Mr. Nesmith had been a tall man and very thin. His clothes had hung on him like he had been fuller once. It was as if when he had converted he had burned off pounds as well as evil. He was always the first one to speak at New People Meetings. He told of how he had lived before. Obsessed with women and drinking. Making money for sin. He had seen the truth and converted, he always said, waving his hands in the air. You were afraid they might hit something and break off. That’s how thin they were. He always wept when he talked.

Father would say, at the end of New People Meetings, that Brother Honesty—Mr. Nesmith’s new name—was his right hand, his co-shepherd and his true disciple. He would bring Brother Honesty’s

gaunt frame up beside his muscular and healthy one, put his right hand on Brother Honesty’s left shoulder, and bend his head to kiss him. Brother Honesty was the man we gave the money to that we had begged for on corners, sold flowers for, sold produce for. He counted it and blessed us.

He was also the Father Judge. The one who would punish us for our transgressions and sins. It was he who had come up with Prayer Posture—the coarse-woven rope rubbing a red line on your neck as your muscles relaxed in exhaustion. Holding your arms and legs straight was impossible for eight hours, especially after a garden session and the Prayer Combat Exercise. He would stand by until you passed out, at which point he judged you sufficiently chastised. If he felt you had not struggled enough, you were on Guard Duty and you got no food for forty days and nights but what you could dig up in a special garden that was watered with our urine.

I knew him.

At four o’clock I was back in bed. The door opened, and someone came in. From the soft and silent way the person moved, I knew it was Marie. She was a small blonde woman who was always smiling. She looked sweet and cute. She looked like she would be easy to hurt. But she was fast and quick and strong. I had been in a mall, on one of my therapist-recommended trips. There had been the sound of a bell, loud and brassy like the one we used to ring to get people to do-



nate. I had moved towards it, and she jerked me back to her. Her strength was so fierce I had a bruise for weeks.

The apartment I had was small, and she could see the bed from the door. A streetlight directly across the parking lot shone through the door behind her. It was very bright, and her shadow streamed before her like my shadow used to when I was on guard, walking the fenced perimeter. Like I was a giant and my shadow was falling on the evil and misled. Like a dark cloud of vengeance and God's wrath.

She knew I would be awake. She turned on the light by the door. "Did you sleep okay?" Her voice was soft and smooth and made me blush. She was a very pretty woman.

"Yes."

"Did you dream?" Her notebook was already out. Dr. Richards had told everyone to write my dreams down. Maybe there were some clues to my recovery in there.

"No," I said while I got out of bed. I was dressed in a thin nightshirt. They brought me new clothes every morning and took away the old. They thought it would be harder for me to run away in just the nightshirt. I made the bed the way I had at the Place—tight and taut, corners by the pillow turned down towards the foot of the bed, and the pillow lengthwise. It looked like a cross.

"Your appointment is today," she said. She went into the tiny kitchen. She had on her red backpack, and she pulled out my clothes for the day and the food she would cook. The pots and pans were al-

ready there, in a locked cabinet. The more dependent I was on them, the better. That was what Dr. Richards had said. He had played with a pencil when he said it. His eyes had been far away.

"After that, if he says it's okay, we can go to the bookstore. I think you're due for a book, aren't you?" She filled a pot with water and put it on the stove. "How does grits sound? And maybe a couple of scrambled eggs with cheese?"

My stomach lurched a little. In the early days I had thrown up. I had been living on bread and water in the mornings. Anything richer seemed gluttonous. Now I could eat and keep it down. But when it was first said, it was like a punch in my gut.

"Okay," I said. Marie was a good cook. She could make the forbidden foods smell so good it was almost okay to give in. Bruce and Roger were fair cooks. My brother never cooked. He phoned for pizza or brought burgers.

She fixed a large meal, and I ate it all. She was proud of me, she said. I was doing it because I could feel something was going to happen.

My appointments with Dr. Richards were early in the morning. The sky was just beginning to turn a faint red. At the Place I would have been up for four hours by now, maybe already finished hoeing and in the breakfast room for the thirty minutes of praying before the bread and water. Father Truth said it was good to start early and humbly, to get much done and have a tame spirit, to walk in the way of

the Lord. Marie drove with one hand on the steering wheel and another on the door lock button.

Dr. Richards had an office downtown. His building was very familiar to me. My main spot for Corner Patrol was three streets down. I had passed this building once every two weeks after my first two years in the Holy Truth Army. You could see his window from where I had crossed the street. Maybe some days, when he was letting his dead eyes wander while a patient talked, he had seen me in that white robe going by. Maybe I was holding flowers, or the books.

Dr. Richards was on the tenth floor. There was no receptionist this early in the morning. We walked into the outer office. It had soft-colored walls, a TV in the corner, and a red and white abstract picture behind the receptionist's desk. It looked like a copy of a Pollock to my eyes.

Marie sat down in a chair. She pulled out a paperback book. It had a picture of a gun on it. It was a .357 Magnum. The kind the Elite Angels carried when they were on patrol. I had been a Soul in Training. I carried a .380 caliber gun with an extra-large clip. I had been one year away from the Angel Exam when the raid happened.

I walked into Dr. Richards' office. It was through a stained oak door, heavy and massive. His room was small and cramped. It had a medium-sized desk, black and metallic. It had his chair, a deluxe model with Auto-Massage. It had a smaller chair on the other side, a little lower than his. And against the far

wall was a long bookcase filled with books that always changed from visit to visit. When I first came here, I saw many I had read before I joined the Truth. Now they were all new.

Dr. Richards was leaning back in his chair. He had a smooth face. It never had an emotion. Not when I cried, not when I yelled, not when I refused to talk. His eyes were brown and as lifelike as a stone. He seemed to be in a cloud of calm, like a shield. Nothing ever made him react. I didn't know how tall he was. I had never seen him standing up.

"Andy. Good to see you again."

I nodded. His voice was rich and full. Like Father Truth's when he stood at the altar praying for our souls and exhorting us to keep the faith and unity. Father Truth had a lovely singing voice—a range of three octaves, I think.

"Did you dream?" I knew he would check with Marie later to see if I'd told the truth. I shook my head.

He leaned forward; his chair moved soundlessly. "Today I'd like to talk about the raid. When you were taken from the Truth cult." He watched me when he said cult. I didn't react. I was too busy remembering the pain of the Prayer Posture.

"Andy. What were you doing that day?"

It was a hot day, the same kind of day a wanderer in the desert would have. Hot and beating down on you and making you happy you were suffering to do the Lord's work. I



was in the field trying to find some good produce. We needed more money to do our work. The morning sermon from Father Truth had been about the need to move and find more fertile grounds for salvation. Now, looking back, I could hear the nervousness and the urgency. Could see the sweat. Back then all I had heard was the voice of my Savior telling me more work was needed.

The hoe had a sweat-stained wood handle that muted the glare of the sun. I stared at it at peripherally while I worked so I wouldn't get a headache and have to work in pain. The shadow that fell across my rows was a surprise and a shock. The members had their own spots to tend, and no one would interfere with another without a request. I looked up and at first thought it was a patch of fog somehow.

The man was tall and dressed in blue with the yellow letters SWAT like a beacon. He smiled at me and said, "So what kind of fertilizer do you use?" While I was stunned, the man threw a gloved hand over my mouth and pushed me to the ground. I landed where I could see the Place. Blue-uniformed men were everywhere, moving in on the central cabin where Father Truth was. The Elite Angels were being herded at gunpoint away from the buildings. I struggled to get up and fight to protect my Leader, but my gun had been removed in the same motion as the taking down, and the man pinned me to the ground and kept me there.

Father Truth came out at a run.

His wide blue eyes darted here and there, and his bearded face was sweaty and had a look of fear and knowing on it. He was wearing a suit instead of his white robes and had a set of keys in his hands. His suit was stuck to his body, glued there by the sweat. His stocky body ran awkwardly, like it was taking a long time to get in motion.

He was running for the garage, where the cars they needed to get into town were stored. Two men in uniforms came out and pointed their guns at him. The suddenly still air carried their orders to stop like a fiber-optic line. Father Truth skidded to a halt, and he almost fell, twisting his long narrow body to stay upright. He grabbed at his jacket for something and then stiffened as the man who had come up behind him pressed a button on a small boxlike thing in his hands. I know it was a Taser, now. The SWAT team had strict orders to get Father Truth alive. The police wanted to know where all the money was. They also didn't want him to become a martyr. The followers might harm themselves.

The deprogramming happened afterwards. Long days of being in a small hot room, forced to wear jeans and shirts with pictures on them. Yelled at when I tried to pray. Having people talk to me about Father Truth, calling him Martin Van Atter, showing tapes of him buying and selling drugs and picking up women. Reading off accusations of drug running, murder, and rape.

It had been a long and uncom-



fortable time. It had only been three months ago that it stopped.

"Do you believe Father Truth was a liar?"

I did. But I still fought against it inside. This good man, who had found me at college after my parents had died and who had taken me in to help me heal, wasn't a liar. It was as he had always said—the evil ones would try to shut him down to prevent the Lord from saving more. I felt like there were two right answers. I believed each one.

The session was almost over. Dr. Richards asked if I was having trouble sleeping. He always did. He had told my guardians he could put me on drugs but that would be a bad move. I was having enough trouble discerning reality as it was.

Marie drove me home, forgetting about the bookstore. I lived in an apartment away from main roads. It was paid for by the inheritance I had received when my parents died. They had put it in a trust fund. My brother had managed to keep me away from it when I was at Father Truth's. Now it was what I lived on and what paid the guardians.

There was a police car out front. There were two men in it. They looked hot and sweaty. When Marie pulled into the parking space, they got out.

"Mr. Andrew Lesson?" The taller one spoke first. The shorter but thinner one hung back.

"This is him," Marie answered for me. "What do you need?"

"Mr. Lesson, have you heard about the murder of Mr. Nesmith, one of your people in the camp?" It

was fast and hard, like a blow from the Prayer Stick in worship sessions. He was trying to shock me. He shocked Marie instead.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She was distracted. I thought about making a run for the woods about fifteen yards from the back of my apartment. I had on clothes. I could run. But I had no money. And the cops would surely take it as a guilty sign. I would be caught. I waited.

Marie was at a loss. She looked back and forth between the two. Then she seemed to go on automatic. "Would you like to come inside?" They said yes, gratefully.

Inside, she was about to offer them a drink. She remembered the bare refrigerator. So she asked instead, "What is this about?"

"Ma'am, last night, about eleven o'clock from what we know, Mr. Nesmith's home was broken into. He was tied up in a position that was used as punishment at the camp. We're checking all of the ex-cult members." He didn't say I was under suspicion. But I knew he was looking for an alibi.

"He never left the place last night," said Marie firmly. I looked at her. I knew what would happen next.

It did. "How do you know?" It was the shorter one. He had a deep voice. He sounded like a starving attack dog growling.

Marie's eyes jerked. For a second, they looked at the corner of the room, by the kitchen and living room wall. So that was where they had hidden the camera they used to watch me. She motioned them aside and whispered to them. The

taller one recoiled a little. Marie shrugged and said, "It seemed necessary. We thought, since he had been in for a while . . . you know."

The policemen thanked her and left. Marie fixed me a lunch of a big thick sandwich and chips. I would be having a noontime worship session now, where we prayed on our knees before Father Truth as he sat on his golden altar and counted his money, waving his hands in the air to keep the chant alive. The chants were always nice—we all blended into one voice, one thought, one being. We melded. Then we would have stew, sometimes with bread we had made from our crops. Then we would clean the guns and either target shoot or read Father Truth's books.

I ate the whole meal. I wondered who had killed Brother Honesty. I wondered why.

Marie left at night when my brother came over after work. He was like me—medium height, thin hair, and placid face. He was younger than me. He was an aide to a government official, some big one. I never remembered who. He was the one who had helped push the raid on the Place. He was the one who had paid the deprogrammers and hired the guards. He visited every day. He didn't stay long. This time he brought a bag of burgers and fries. The smell was somehow too real. His name was James. I didn't call him by his name anymore. It was too hard to fight through the immediate instinct to call him sinner.

"Was it a good day?" He looked

around the small, neat room. I had no books or magazines. They were brought with the guards and taken away when they left. Maybe they thought the next chapter would inspire me to run.

"I guess so," I said. I loved him with the healing part of my mind for getting me away. The other part prayed for him and looked at the veins in his neck. I had killed livestock before and knew how to cut without getting the knife stuck.

"You heard about that guy from the cult?"

"The police came by."

"Why?" He blinked.

"They think it had to be somebody in the cult. Who knew about the position and all."

He nodded. "But they know it wasn't you, right? Marie told them?"

"She said something. I didn't hear it. They left after that." I didn't look at the corner where the camera was.

He smiled at me. "You're going to be okay. Just keep working on it." He left me then.

I turned out the lights and went to bed. I was very careful not to look up at the corner where the camera was.

This time I slept until four. I woke up and turned on my light just as Bruce was coming in the door. Bruce was big and hulking. He looked like a guard should look. But he was slow. In thought and action. He didn't talk much.

"You dream?"

"No."

"Want breakfast?"

"Please." He lumbered past my bed and into the kitchen, fumbling at his key to unlock the cabinets. I turned on the TV. There was no news of a murder like Brother Honesty's.

It was a slow day. Days after meetings with Dr. Richards usually were. To let me rest, I guess. Bruce had brought three paperbacks for me. Stephen King, John Grisham, and Larry Niven. We had not been allowed to read any book at camp except for the Bible and Father Truth's books and pamphlets. It was to preserve our mental toughness and faith. Bruce pulled the books out of his green army-style backpack. I had carried one like that on my War Conversion Training sessions.

We read until midday when Bruce and I went to the store to pick up some toilet tissue and paper towels. Bruce bought a newspaper at the entrance, holding on to me with one big hand. It was a short shopping trip, and we were back in less than an hour. The drive from and to the apartment was the longest part.

He opened the door and sat down in the rocking chair to read the paper. I sat on the couch and looked through a book. After a few minutes Bruce got up to go to the bathroom. Like he always did after a trip. He went to the door and locked the three locks with his key. The windows were made of shatterproof glass, and there was no back door. He went to the bathroom.

He left the paper, and I took it and read it. Casually. I flipped through like I was looking for the

comics. I found the report in the Headlines section, in the back. There was another body found in Titusville, a town in another state. It had been an ex-cult member. I didn't recognize the name. She had been killed in a crucified position.

I made sure to turn to the comics so the camera could see me do it.

The news grew worse. More and more cult members were found dead, some in ways that were overtly religious and some by simple accidents. The FBI and the U.S. marshals were getting involved, and there were offers of Witness Relocation efforts for the remaining cult members—now down to twenty or so. I was one of those offered protection. Dr. Richards recommended, to me and my family, that I turn it down. I didn't need more upheaval in my life, he said.

It was widely suspected that Van Atter was trying to cut down the number of people who could testify against him. That was right from the paper. But he had been in solitary confinement since he was arrested. The authorities were afraid he would call for a "holy war" if he had any contact with the outside world. So how did he get the message out?

They wondered, and people died. The only thing for certain was that it had to be someone who knew the cult intimately—ex-members from ten years ago were among the dead. I dreamed about the camp more and more. I could see everyone I had known.

There had been many people who weren't happy with the camp.



Some got in and realized it was a cult—I could admit that now. They were pressured to stay. Father Truth would say they were resisting the truth and confine them under guard. Sometimes he did other things to them—more work, more prayer sessions. There were sometimes accidents. That was what we were told—an accident involving Sister Virtue or Brother Strength. We would pray for them as the bodies were burned to release the soul. The smoke filled the room and the smell was like overdone roast pork.

So, besides Van Atter, there were many people who might want members of the Holy Truth dead—but who? And why would the person kill everyone? Only the top two or three masters—Angelic Beings—were the ones who gave out punishments and the like, so why kill the rank and file, the ones who had been out there hoeing and growing and begging?

The police were worried—they would cruise by my apartment. I slept lightly, and the sound of the engines going by jarred me awake. Sometimes they shone a spotlight along the front of the building, and the bright white beam coming in the windows and through the blue curtains was like being speared by a beam of blue ocean water. I was under guard from two groups now—my brother and his employees and the police. I assumed they were doing the same for every other ex-member of the cult as well.

And still people died.

It had been three months since I'd waked up at three thirty in the

morning. I had gone to Dr. Richards every week, and he thought I was getting better. Van Atter's trial was starting. I was a star witness. I hadn't been two months before. The main people who had been called to testify were now dead.

I awoke at four o'clock when my guards unlocked the door. It was my brother. He had never come in the morning before. He was dressed like he had stopped by on his way to work, nice suit and tie and shoes. He came in softly calling, "Andy. Andy. Are you awake?"

"Yes." I got up and made the bed. For the first time I did not make the cross. James came over to me and placed a hand on my shoulder, and I didn't feel the urge to jerk away. His hand was warm and soft—like Van Atter's had been. But I wasn't afraid of this one clenching down on my skin and squeezing like a vise.

"I thought . . . you know . . . maybe you might want some company today. Since you have to do the trial and all. So I thought I'd take you to and from the courthouse. Dr. Richard said it would be okay for it to be just you and me." He gave me a careful hug. "To let you know that I'm here for you."

I hugged him back and didn't even think about pushing him over and running for it.

We went in his car, a nice dark green fast one. I had no idea what kind it was. It was playing some loud music that actually sounded pretty good. James looked at me a little nervously and then left it on. I was tapping my foot by the time we reached downtown.

The courtroom was one place we



had never been allowed to ask for money at. The police station, the jail, and the local FBI office were others. Van Atter had been careful not to draw much attention to himself. I had never seen it before, or if I had, I had long since forgotten it.

It was large and made of white marble shining in the sun, marred on the side by the red paint smear, "ALL LAWYRS SUCK." It had white lions up front, reared back on their hind legs like they were about to pounce, and small fountains dotted here and there among the steel columns. It was a combination of dignity and garishness.

We went inside, and after showing our I.D.'s (which had been mailed to us) we were allowed in the waiting room just off the courtroom where Van Atter would be on trial. James had brought some books to pass the time, but I was called rather quickly. James squeezed my arm when I stood up.

It was a large courtroom and very quiet when I was escorted in. It was almost empty, and my steps echoed in the air. Up front was the judge's desk, if that's what you call it, high and tall. The man behind it was thin—he looked like a skull poking out from Death's black robes—and he had an angry expression on his face. To his left was the witness stand, smaller than I had thought it would be—barely big enough for the simple chair that was in it.

I couldn't look at anything else—I was at the swinging door that separated the court from the audience. There was Father Holy Truth—Martin Van Atter. He was dressed

in a nice suit, dark blue. It looked odd on him—he had always worn white at the camp. He looked calm, a set, placid face. But his intent blue eyes had a glare in them. I knew that glare. It meant someone in the Flock had been untrue and it was time for punishment—more work, beating, the nightly trips to his bedroom for personal attention for the women in the camp. He was angry.

The bailiff, a short stocky man, touched my arm. I had stood by the door staring at Martin for some time now and hadn't realized it. "Sir, if you would come this way," he said. He was strong when he took my arm and guided me to the witness stand. He ducked and brought up a Bible, and I put my hand on it.

"So, Andy . . . how many people were in the Holy Truth Camp?" I assumed it was the prosecutor. That was who I was being called to testify for. He was well-dressed and looked nervous. It was a big case—all the papers I had seen had said so. And there were a lot fewer people who could testify now.

"It went up and down." My voice was soft and unsteady. I could feel the glare from Father Van Atter.

"What would you say was the most?" He was calm when he asked it, like he was a teacher in camp who knew I knew the answer. I just needed some help getting it out.

"About thirty, I would say. Our sleeping chamber could hold twenty, and there was one time we had people in sleeping bags on the floor. Ten of them. We used them for



prayer mats . . .” I shut up.

He nodded at me happily. “That’s fine, Andy. That’s fine. Just for the record, would you please indicate if you see the man you called Father Holy Truth in the courtroom?”

I pointed to the man who was staring at me. He drew his chin up and his lips moved, forming some words I couldn’t discern.

“Mr. Van Atter!” barked the judge. He thrust his skull-face forward like a turtle snapping at an insect. “You will refrain from any kind of communication to the witness or I will have you removed.”

“Your Honor!” The man beside Van Atter jumped up. He was tall and muscular. A nice looking man. He would have been a natural for the Corner Patrol—he looked earnest. He also looked confident. “I fail to see what my client did . . .”

“Mr. Jessel, I have had enough of your client’s intimidation attempts. This is your last warning, sir. Control your client, or I will.” The judge waved a surprisingly hefty arm at the lawyer questioning me. “Mr. Crendall, you may continue.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. Andy, how did the people at the camp earn money?”

“We each had a garden we tended, and we’d sell the food at local markets. Some people would go on what we called Corner Patrols—selling books and things we had made—necklaces and beads. Some people would sell flowers and ask for money. Not too many—ten or so. Father warned us about corruption from the world outside.”

“Did you ever do any of those things?”

“A few times.”

“Were you any good?” He acted like this was an important question, leaning forward and staring at me.

“I was okay, I guess. We didn’t tell each other what we had made. Brother—Mr. Nesmith was always happy with what I brought in.”

“Mr. Nesmith was the person who took the money?”

“Yes. We called him Brother Honest.” I was about to say he was the one who had died, but Mr. Crendall jumped ahead.

“So how much did you usually make?”

“For a whole day’s work I could bring in about one hundred dollars. Usually.” It felt strange to admit that. We were forbidden to talk about it, to prevent pride.

Mr. Crendall turned to his left, to the jury, whom I noticed for the first time. Twelve people, six men and six women, all of them listening with expressions of thought on their faces. Some had little notebooks, and they were writing in them. “Ten people. Maybe one hundred dollars a day if they were good. On this little income Mr. Van Atter could have a three hundred acre ranch, ten new Rolls-Royces, and a bank account that had upwards of ten million dollars in it. Does that sound possible, Andy, on what you and the other followers brought in?”

“I don’t think so.” We had been told God blessed the dollars and made them multiply.

Mr. Crendall thanked me and sat down. Mr. Jessel stood up, pausing for a second to button his jacket



across his midriff. He walked up to me.

"Andy, were you high up in the camp? Were you in the Council of Elder Advisors, I believe it was called?"

"No, I was very low. I was in the second rank from the bottom, a Soul in Training."

"So you really don't know how many things were going on at the camp, do you?" Van Atter closed his eyes when Jessel asked this question. I knew why.

"Yes I did. We all cross-trained. All of us would rotate from one chore to another. The only thing that was not an automatic rotation was the corner patrols—" I actually heard the lowercase letters this time—"because Father Truth didn't feel some people were faithful enough for that. But I did everything everybody else in the camp did." This was not how I had expected the trial to go—they weren't concentrating at all on the cult Van Atter had set up.

Jessel was too good a lawyer to show his anger at that answer, so he paced before the jury box for a second before asking his next questions. "Andy. Do you know how many people in the camp were rich? Before they joined?"

"Only one—Brother Honesty, Mr. Nesmith."

"How do you know that?" asked Jessel with his eyebrows raised.

"When you first came in the camp, we had a New People Meeting where you told about yourself so the rest of the camp could pray for you. Only Mr. Nesmith said he had made a lot of money—actual-

ly, now that I think of it, he just said he had been successful in business, so maybe—"

"Thank you, that will be all." Jessel turned around and walked back to Martin. Martin looked angry, but his eyes weren't glaring. In fact they seemed happy like when he was counting the money we had gathered for him.

"You are excused, Mr. Lesson. And please remember, this trial is under a gag order, so you cannot talk to the press at all."

I was escorted out of the courtroom and met my brother outside, and we left. We went back to my apartment, stopping on the way at a drive-thru for some food. I was starting to get a taste for the curly fries.

We ate together at my place. James asked, "Are you okay? Did anything happen in there?"

"No. Van Atter tried to say something to me at one point, but the judge made him quit. But it seemed strange."

"Like how?"

"Well, they didn't ask me at all about the cult. Not a question about who was there and what we did beyond the money stuff... I thought they were going to try to get him for that."

James sighed and ran his hand through his thinning hair, like Dad's. Fine black hair that would fall out by thirty—he had been bald by the time I was in high school. James looked a lot like Dad, short and somehow mousy yet with a steel bar inside. He had never given up on me, even when the deprogramming had been just



starting and I had seemed hopeless.

"Well, I don't think they can go after him for the cult. He's claiming it was never a religion. Just a bunch of people who listened to him and thought of him as a hero."

"But that's—"

"And, even if they could prove it was a cult, he would claim freedom of religion, and the courts are usually very loath to go after that. Trust me. I know the prosecutor—he and I have done some work together before—and they talked about this long and hard."

"So what is the trial all about then, damn it?"

James' eyebrows raised up. "Well, they're trying to prove that he had to be into some form of illegal activity to fund his 'lavish lifestyle,' as the papers put it. If they can prove that, they can put him away."

"But for making us work for him, telling us he was the Second Coming..."

"They can't judge him at all on that. Every American has the right to set up a religion claiming he or she is some kind of Holy Being as long as they don't break any *other* rules while doing so. And Van Atter used you people as carefully as he could. Only a few in the group knew what was going on—and some of them were the first to die."

"Do they know who's killing the other members yet?"

"They say they've got some leads, and they're working on it." James was openly skeptical. "You ask me, this trial will be over long before they catch the guy."

He was right. The trial ended the

next day, when Van Atter's body was found hanging in his cell.

Bruce woke me up when he came in—I was sound asleep. I actually grumbled and turned over, away from the light spilling into the room, but he grabbed me and shook me wholly awake. "I think you'll want to see this." He clicked on the TV. The local station was showing a picture of the prison with an arrow pointing at one corner.

"This is where Martin Van Atter's body was found hanging in his cell late last night when the prison guards made their rounds. Mr. Van Atter, also known as Father Truth, was indicted for drug smuggling and various other crimes that he may have used the Holy Truth cult as a cover for. The trial was under way, and it has been widely suspected that it was going badly for Mr. Van Atter, badly enough for his lawyer to have spent all last night working out a whole new strategy. Van Atter was in solitary confinement, as he has been ever since he was arrested, so there is as of now no suspicion of foul play." It was a voiceover from a woman.

"This will end the trial but not the questions. It has been widely surmised that there were other high ranking members of the cult who have not been found, people who tipped Martin about coming raids and warned him if the police were close—one of the reasons it took so long to arrest him. And of course, even though a vast amount of the money raised by Van Atter was seized, the FBI suspects some of the money was missing before

they got to it. They hoped the trial would reveal who the mysterious other persons were, but now it looks like they may never know."

"I was called last night when it happened. Know some people up there," Bruce said. "You okay?"

It was like nothing had happened at all. I felt no sorrow, no relief, no anger. I shrugged.

"Dr. Richards thinks you might need to go in, see him. Since this was such a shock and all. James agrees. We got an appointment in an hour."

"That early?" Five o'clock in the morning? Was he that worried about me?

"Dr. Richards says he'll get there early for you. Get ready. James will meet us there."

Bruce opened his backpack and took out my clothes for the day. And some more that he handed to me. "James and us, we talked. Figured you might like having a choice in the mornings. And here's a wallet for you, too. Got your old license and all that stuff in it." I took them as if they were the Holy Grail and the One True Cross.

We ate a fast breakfast, which left me still hungry, and drove down to Dr. Richards' office. I spent the whole time in the car absently listening to the music and looking at the pictures in my wallet—old pictures of me, James, my family. A long-forgotten girlfriend. A so-far-out-of-date driver's license that the haircut was about to come back in style.

Bruce parked in front of the building. "Hop on out. He wanted

you to go in alone. Said you were ready." I got out. Clothes and walking by myself in one day?

The front door was propped open with a doorstep. I walked in and went to the elevators as I always did. But then I changed my mind. I decided to use the stairs. I'd never done that when I was being escorted into and out of the building—it would be too easy to push someone down and make a run for it. The elevator was tight, confined, like the prayer booth we were shut in sometimes if we argued. The fire stairs were right by the elevator anyway, so I used them.

Ten flights, and I was puffing and gasping when I made it up. I was very out of shape. The work at Van Atter's camp had done one good thing—it had me in the best physical fitness of my life. But I could always start an exercise program that didn't require checking my brain at the door. I went through the fire door, which wheezed softly back into place behind me.

I tripped over a man who was crouching by the elevator door, falling over him. I had been trained in how to fall. I went into a roll and came up straight and ready. Dr. Richards didn't—he flopped down awkwardly and dropped something that hit with a heavy thud on the plush carpet.

It was a gun.

Dr. Richards, his dead eyes now burning with anger, crabbed across the floor to it. He was taller than I had expected—he was bigger than I was—and he looked like a spider as he scuttled to the .380, the kind of gun I had used back in the camp.



I snapped back into the training I had been through. First, don't give the opponent a chance. I kicked out hard, missed the jaw but connected with his body hard enough to knock him away. He rolled, caught my foot, and twisted it hard while pulling it forward. I fell down, hitting the back of my head, and my ankle began to pulse in pain.

Dr. Richards went after the gun again . . . which was no longer on the floor. Bruce, who stared at it and then at us, was holding it.

Dr. Richards stood up. He was tall and withered like a string bean left in the sun way past the time of picking. He said, "Bruce. Thank God. He's had a setback. Quick, give me the gun." His voice was still soft but with a sharp, commanding edge.

Bruce handed it to him numbly, and then said, "Hey, wait a minute, where'd he get the—"

Dr. Richards shot him in the chest, and Bruce was flung backwards, hitting the wall while being spun around from the force. I spoke quickly to distract Dr. Richards from seeing what I had seen.

"What is going on?"

He turned to me, one hand brushing at his white suit, which had picked up some dust in his fall to the ground. "You've had a very bad setback. Very, very bad." He had regained his miasma of calm.

It was the white suit. "You and Martin . . ."

"Father!" he screamed at me. "You are a Fallen One! Like the rest!" He raised the gun.

"When?" I asked. This wouldn't work for long. Richards lowered the

gun while he answered in the same voice he had always talked to me in—dead.

"At the beginning. I was one of his First. The man was so good . . . but he fell. Like all the rest. And then he turned. But I will be true; I will follow his Commandments. All who fail him will die."

Then his chest exploded into a pink hole and a rush of blood, and I felt hot air zip by my face. Dr. Richards fell to the ground. He still looked calm. The air smelled of cordite and iron.

Bruce was rubbing his chest and swearing under his breath. He held a .357 Magnum, and gray smoke crept from the barrel. His shirt was undone and the bulletproof vest he was wearing bore a large spot of silver right above the heart. Dr. Richards had been a good shot. But he had been too flustered by the surprises. Bruce didn't bleed when he was shot, didn't leave a red streak down the pristine walls like an arrow.

Bruce levered himself slowly to his feet, constantly rubbing his chest. He handed me a brown object. "You left your wallet," he said simply.

James was in Dr. Richards' office. He had been knocked unconscious and tied up, but he was okay. We set him free and called the police. They were, to say the least, surprised.

But they did some checking and found that Martin Van Atter, way before he had formally started the Holy Truth cult, had quite a following at a small college—people

who thought he was psychic. He would do tricks and such, and they would be impressed. Pay for his dinners and the like. It was probably where he got the idea of starting a cult. One of the people who had been with him a lot had been a tall, stringbean-thin psychology major.

They stayed together only until Martin dropped out of college, but apparently they had made their plan by then. Dr. Richards—Keith was his first name, I learned—took the money Martin gave him, slipped it into his business, and laundered it. By keeping in touch with other “deprogrammers” across the nation, he also kept track of people who had gotten out of the cult. It was how he knew where to find all the members who had left the cult. Most of the money that had been missing from Van Atter’s account had been used to pay for those deaths. He only took care of a few himself—like Nesmith, the one who could have hurt Martin the worst.

He had been moving slowly and carefully until he learned—from a bribed lackey at Rommers and Krimson, the law firm he’d hired—that Martin was planning to deny he was the Second Coming. A lifetime of belief snapped in an instant. I had three months of deprogramming; Richards had been thrown that all at once. It must have been hard, and he had snapped.

How he got to Van Atter is still a mystery, but the prison guard who

was on duty that night had a long history of debt that was all paid off quickly and has been missing ever since. One does tend to get some ideas.

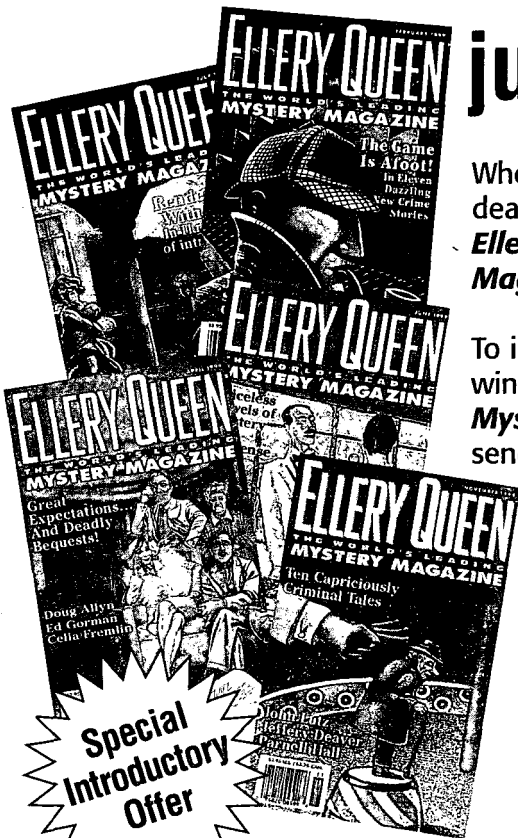
I’m still easing into society—easing because there’s been too much change out there. But now I have a choice of clothes in the morning and books left overnight. I even passed by one of the Holy Truth Members, still believing as he stood outside a subway station selling copies of books Van Atter had written—now the “Martyred Saint” as red letters proclaimed. I walked on by, ignoring his calls. He didn’t have much money in his basket.

We’re looking at other places now, James and I. He knows more about what an apartment needs to have, and I have never even filled out an application form for a place or a job. Things I have to learn, so many of them! But I’m going forward.

I also have a gun now and take self-defense classes. James and I take them together down at the YMCA, with Bruce and Marie teaching us. See, after Van Atter died, some of the cultists who remained began to think he had been killed because some of his flock had lost faith . . . and they want to punish the guilty. I feel sorry for them and hope they will get cured, and I always load my gun when I leave the house in case they decide to come after me one day. Slaves without a master could do anything.

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FICTION

FOUR WISHES

Gary Alexander



Illustration by Kelly Denato

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 2/01

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Things went sour for Musgrove even before the dye pack exploded.

The '85 Chevrolet Corvette he'd stolen for sentimental reasons started hard outside the bank. It finally kicked over and he peeled out before the cops arrived, yeah, but in his mirror he saw someone run outside and jot down his license number.

There would be no clear sailing on the interstates.

People didn't maintain their cars like they used to, he thought, just as the bag of money blew up, covering him in pink.

Pink?

When did they start using pink?

Musgrove swerved into an alley behind a deserted warehouse and pushed open a door. Maybe there'd be a sink. He could wash up, scrub off the dye, find old clothes, coveralls, whatever, bug out the front door, and catch a bus.

Bank robbery wasn't rocket science, he knew. It was quick and easy. You just needed to concentrate and pay attention to details. Plan as he might, bad luck was doing Musgrove in again.

When his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw neither water nor clothing but instead a midget who dressed funny. The little guy leaned against a pillar, arms folded, wearing tights and an old-timey hat with a feather in it.

"What the hell," Musgrove said.

"I'm a fairy," said the midget.

Musgrove clenched his fists. "Don't get any ideas about the pink, shorty. You're barking up the wrong tree."

"Not that kind. I can grant you four wishes."

Musgrove laughed. "I thought it was three."

"Used to be, but we've liberalized. Clients invariably squander the first on a test wish and complain afterward. Our new policy is to let you get it out of your system and begin on a level playing field."

Musgrove decided to humor him. He rolled up a sleeve. "Okay, can you get rid of this?"

"Your arm?"

"No, dummy. The tattoo."

"Madge" surrounded by hearts had been a constant and bitter reminder of infidelity. In the joint barely fifteen years and she hadn't waited for him. "Can do," the fairy said and the tattoo was gone.

"This is legit?" Musgrove stammered. "What I need worse is for this pink stuff to go away."

The fairy snapped his fingers. "Not a problem."

"Hey, that shouldn't count. I didn't actually, you know, wish."

"This is the new millennium, sir. We've relaxed language formalities, preferring to evaluate and interpret, to better fulfill the client's desires."

"Okay, I still have two wishes left. Far out."

"Far out? Where've you been?"

"Released last Wednesday," Musgrove said. "Robbed a bank to buy a brand-new '85 Vette. It ain't like I was a terrorist or anything and they throw the book at me. Wish that hunka junk outside was new. I'd be long gone."

"You could have used a better attorney," the fairy suggested.

"Yeah, tell me about it. My lawyer's a real turkey. I wonder what happened to the shyster."

"Presto," said the fairy, clicking his heels. "Double presto."

"Hey, knock it off! I split outa here, I still get my wishes?"

"Our offer is good for thirty days," the fairy said vaguely.

"Sayonara, shorty," Musgrove said, walking out into a police trap. Officers not pointing weapons at him were admiring the getaway car, a fully restored '85 Corvette that even had the new car smell.

Musgrove broke into an ear-to-ear grin. "I wish I were on a beach right now sitting on a pile of money surrounded by babes in bikinis."

The grin degraded into a sickened smile as they rushed in. They pummeled him to the ground and snapped the cuffs on. The cop with a knee on Musgrove's neck read him his rights while the watch commander and the lieutenant conferred about whether to take him directly to jail or to a rubber room first for observation.

Meanwhile, at the modest office suite of Alvin Selkirk, attorney-at-law, Madge stopped her two-finger typing and listened again. Sometimes Al would return from one of his long lunches with a snootful, the two-timing creep, and she'd hear disgusting sounds, but it was usually him snoring.

A gobbling noise came from Al's private office. She stood up and listened some more.

Gobble gobble.

Gobble gobble gobble.

Madge sat back down at her keyboard.

Now there was a pecking at his door. That was just too weird. Madge put on her stereo headphones, cranked up the music, and resumed working.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton Getty/Liaison Agency

Has she lost her head? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the September Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

Stranger Than Fiction



Lawrence Doorley

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 201

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ANONYMOUS, a much-quoted sage, probably said it first, but Nicolas Boileau (1636-1711), French poet and essayist, is usually given credit for it:

"Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable," he wrote in one of his essays. Later Byron put it in almost the identical words:

"'Tis strange—but true; for truth
is always strange;
Stranger than fiction."

They're both right. Actual happenings are often so extraordinary, so incredible, they are beyond the imagination of the most creative storyteller. What follows, a crime committed in a small-town library where fiction in the form of approximately fifty-five thousand volumes outnumbered truth—history, biography, science, five daily newspapers—about two to one is another tragic example of real life outdoing make-believe.

The crime took place a little after one thirty on Monday afternoon, August seventh, 1989, in the old brick library on Chestnut Street in Hillsdale, the county seat of Ashford County in the Appalachian foothills of southwestern Pennsylvania, a chronically depressed area since the once enormous bituminous coal deposits were worked out twenty years back.

It was such a sensational happening—a ninety-one-year-old nun smote down by a thirty-seven-year-old rich philanthropist universally known as the most nonviolent person one could imagine—that the

pall that had been hanging over the area for years lifted for a few weeks, the whole county mesmerized by the bizarre crime.

Of course, in today's violent world no one is safe, even priests, many of whom have been struck down while gloomily counting the Sunday collection, and in the world of mystery fiction the village vicar meets an untimely end as often as the lord of the manor, the mysterious stranger, the local hussy in the cosy English murder mysteries of the Agatha Christie school.

But a nun—a wee, frail, wispy nonagenarian who had been adrift in her own shadowy world for nearly thirty years, who was so ancient that she still wore the old-time habiliments including the wimple (black like the rest of her habit), the folded head covering that left only her face exposed, a face with no expression but remarkably unlined—struck down in broad daylight in a public facility, the weapon a metal bust of St. Jerome, patron saint of librarians (eight inches high, weighing one pound nine ounces per the police report, depicting the bearded saint, a tome under each arm, his expression benign), and the perpetrator . . . well, it was almost impossible to believe. How in God's name could something like that happen?

Now, now, none of that; God had nothing to do with it, nothing. What happened was the final act in a long drama of seemingly unrelated incidents, things done with the best of intentions. If such and such hadn't happened, dear Sister Mary Bridget would soon have died a



peaceful death in the nursing home, especially if what happened in July 1987—more than two years before the tragic occurrence—hadn't happened.

But as one devout Catholic said, "At least the dear old soul didn't suffer. She died instantly; God's mercy."

What happened in July 1987 was that Emily Larkin (no spring chicken but not yet of a certain age), who had manned the reference desk for nearly twenty-five years, flew south on wings of song, an ecstatic captive of an old flame, now widowed, who had zoomed up from Florida, swooped her up, and carried her off to paradise.

That left a vital position to fill. But the city fathers, the budget leaking red, saw a chance to save a buck. Annie Barnes, the librarian, a skinny little forty-nine-year-old widow with a ton of energy, was told that reference would no longer be salaried. She would have to replace Emily with a volunteer.

Annie protested, vehemently. No good. Maybe next year, she was told. Ha, she snorted, how many times have I heard that? With Emily gone, that left four paid employees. Annie; Jan Phillips (fifty-nine, a grandmother, a widow also); Joyce Madison (in her early forties, rather nondescript, a book lover—she was in the right job—and almost resigned to old-maidhood); and Joe Kaminsky, janitor, maintenance man, groundskeeper. Joe was often called upon to help with the shelving even though it was well known that he had never mastered the Dewey decimal system.

Four salaried employees—three and a quarter, actually, Joe having his hands full repairing the roof, keeping the grass cut in the summer, the snow shoveled in winter—could not operate an eighty thousand volume library. Help came from volunteers, a wonderful group of about thirty (it fluctuated, was never less than twenty-five). They were all women whose ages ranged from the late forties to the late seventies. Some worked a whole day a week, others only a half day, but it was enough to keep the library operating efficiently.

A crisis loomed. Reference required someone immediately. There was no thought of putting either Joyce or Jan there; they were already overwhelmed, as was Annie. She talked one volunteer after another into taking over Reference part-time. As she feared, it didn't work. Reference desk people are specialists, for though libraries have an abundance of reference books available, the average reference desk person has a wealth of information on the tip of the tongue, questions asked dozens of times.

Henry VIII; how many wives did he have, and did he behead all of them? Henry VIII had six wives, beheaded two, Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard. Was there a real Typhoid Mary? Yes, her name was Mary Mallon. She was an itinerant cook in New York City who spread the disease from restaurant to restaurant, family to family. Did Michelangelo have a surname? Yes, it was Buonarroti.

Some questions have to be looked up. That's where the reference

books come in handy. Also, reference desk experts are frequently called on by patrons seeking information on a particular subject or historical figure with only very little for the specialist to go on. ("There was something on TV last night about some German looking for Troy. I kinda nodded off. Would you have anything on that?")

That's where the computer helps—should help. It can, with a few key words, locate the books the library has on the subject. Unfortunately, the ancient computer system at the Hillsdale library malfunctioned for days at a time.

A new system? Forget it. If there was any loose money lying around, the city fathers told Annie it would go for a new conveyor at the dump. At which Annie gritted her teeth, let loose with four or five bad words. No wonder. Garbage having priority over literature.

The volunteers tried, to no avail. They simply could not cope with Reference even though they were all intelligent, well-read women, their duties having been checking out books, handling returns, and shelving, especially the latter. But even if each one had been perfect for the job, what really wrecked things was the lack of continuity. Liz worked Monday morning; Betty, Monday afternoon; Jean, Tuesday morning; Sally the afternoon, et cetera, et cetera. As they say up in that neck of the woods, "too many cooks spoil the broth."

The situation desperate, Annie took desperate action. Murmuring a prayer, she phoned Joseph Patrick Callighan III, for she, like most

of Hillsdale, knew that he was a genuine walking encyclopedia, his six feet three inches, one hundred thirty-five pound, slumped-over, bespectacled frame supporting a three pound brain that was the repository for tons of information.

A ravenous bookworm since childhood, he had devoured four or five books a week all his life, fueling his unquenchable appetite with books from the family library. (J. P. Callighan, his grandfather, had accumulated thousands of books, many of them rare, and Joseph Patrick III had added many more to the collection.) In addition he'd consumed entire shelves—from 291.15 (Angels) through 940.54 (World War III)—plus shelf after shelf of F (Fiction) and B (Biography). Over the years when the paragon herself, Emily Larkin, was stuck, she phoned him. He in his shy, diffident way had never failed her.

Nevertheless, if (there's that *if* again) it hadn't been for a stroke of fate—his mother's death three months before—Annie would never have called. It would have been useless. His mother would never have permitted her grown son to be away from her for five and a half days a week (the library closed at noon on Saturday).

But now she was gone. Still, Annie expected resistance. She got it.

"Reference?" he gasped. "Me? Oh my, I mean I? You . . . you want me to take over the reference desk? Oh, Annie," (it had taken her years to get him to call her by her first name) ". . . why . . . oh my . . . I, I couldn't do that. I'm not qualified. There are dozens of categories in



which I am abysmally ignorant ... dozens."

"Name one," Annie demanded, "That's if there is one."

There was: Norse mythology.

"I've neglected it shamefully," he confessed in a contrite voice. "All I know is that in the beginning there was a huge void, which the Norse called Ginnugaup, and—"

Annie interrupted.

"Ginny, ninny, whinny, who cares. Now, Joseph Patrick, I can't remember ever getting a question on Norse mythology and if one comes up in the future, we have plenty of reference books on mythology as you well know. Joseph Patrick, I am pleading with you. We are in dire, dire trouble. Don't fail me."

"Oh, Annie, you make me feel awful, but even if I felt I were qualified, I couldn't do it. I'm very busy with the lawyers on Mother's estate. I'm truly sorry, honestly I am."

Annie wouldn't quit, she couldn't, there was too much at stake.

"Then we're doomed, done, kaput. A library without a strong reference desk is like a ship without a chronometer or whatever they use now. I'll have to tell the city fathers we may as well close the library—as much as it will break my heart." She finished with two broken-hearted snuffles as her conscience upbraided her ("Shame, shame."). Of course the library wouldn't close. Somehow it would keep going.

That did it. He caved in, whimpering that he'd give it two weeks.

"Not a day longer, Annie," he said, "and if it doesn't work out—and I anticipate it won't—I won't stay."

It worked out, he stayed, was

deliriously happy. Then, in August 1989 ...

A hysterical volunteer phoned 911, screaming, "Murder at the library ... send the police and an ambulance ... hurry!"

They hurried. Both Joseph Patrick, who had fainted, and Sister Mary Bridget, apparently beyond earthly care, were quickly placed in the ambulance. It sped to the hospital, siren wailing.

Chief of Detectives Mike Kiegel and his sidekick, Sergeant Vince Markowsky, took over, accomplished very little. None of the seventeen persons in the library—Joyce Madison and Jan Phillips (Annie was outside, so was Joe Kaminsky, he cutting the grass in his new riding mower), the three volunteers, the twelve patrons, who included Sister Catherine—had seen what happened. But a senior citizen wearing a hearing aid, reading the *New York Times* in the combination periodical room and reading room, insisted that he had heard a "choked cry of pure rage" a second or so before he looked up to see Sister Mary Bridget slumping slowly from the chair in which Sister Catherine had placed her.

But this chap was known to be almost deaf in spite of his hearing aid. The police found his statement hard to believe, even though he insisted that he thought he'd heard the old nun mumbling something and had turned his hearing aid on full. ("It was a kind of sing-song thing, repeated and repeated," he said. No, he hadn't understood a word, but damn it, he had heard "the choked cry of pure rage.")



Everyone was horrified, none more than Annie Barnes, outside under the back door awning fueling her vile addiction, smoking. A three-pack-a-day smoker for years, she was down to a mere four cigarettes a day, a remarkable achievement, had vowed to cut it to three by next week, the week after for sure.

She was on the second of the day, the first since breakfast, had a precious quarter inch remaining—about to burn her fingers—when the door burst open, Jan Phillips sobbing, “Oh, Annie, something terrible, *awful*. The little nun has been killed by . . . oh, Annie, it’s . . . it’s . . .” She couldn’t say any more. She had said enough.

Flinging away the precious quarter inch cigarette Annie rushed inside after Jan. She heard the ambulance speeding away, and before the detectives arrived, she got as much information as she could from the stunned staff and volunteers, hurried into her little office, phoned the law firm of Beeson, Bates, Michaels, knowing that the firm had been handling the Callighan family affairs since J. P. hit it rich.

“I wish to speak to Attorney Beeson,” she said when his secretary answered the phone.

“No one speaks to Attorney Beeson during his nap hour,” his secretary told Annie grimly, “unless it’s an extreme emergency.”

“Try this,” Annie shot back. “Your prize client, Joseph Patrick Callighan III, has just been taken to the hospital in an ambulance. After . . .” Annie paused.

“So?”

“After having murdered a nun here at the library. Does that qualify as an extreme emergency?”

It did.

Mike and Vince finished up around five thirty, and confusing though the evidence was, the conclusion was inescapable. Joseph Patrick Callighan III, the gentlest of human beings (“the dearest, sweetest, kindest person God ever created,” sobbed one volunteer; “a pure saint,” another one sobbed), had thrown St. Jerome with murderous intent, the target either one Edith Janson, a new volunteer, a retired legal secretary who’d moved to town from Pittsburgh, or—as preposterous as it seemed—Sister Mary Bridget.

Consciences worked overtime that evening. Annie blamed herself. Since the arrival of Edith Janson a month before, there had been a drastic change in Joseph Patrick, and Annie had been keeping a sharp eye on him just in case things got worse. She was sure that if she had been inside she could have prevented the awful tragedy. She hadn’t told the police about the escalating tension between Joseph Patrick and Edith Janson, but her conscience kept pounding away. At midnight she gave in, promised herself that she’d go to the police in the morning, reveal all.

Edith Janson had also withheld vital information. She had almost convinced herself that the puzzling incident in which she’d been involved couldn’t have had any bearing on what had happened. But she knew better. Well, she said to herself unhappily, late that evening,



I'll go to the police station first thing in the morning. After all, I am duty-bound, regardless of the consequences to Joseph Patrick Callaghan III.

Sister Catherine knelt at the foot of her bed for over an hour, praying for guidance. It came: go to the police, tell what you know, it could be crucial to a plea of temporary insanity.

A tall, slender, handsome woman in her mid sixties, Sister Catherine was retired from the order (the Sisters of Benevolence), had her own apartment, drove a late model car, all due to an inheritance from her beloved father. Like many modern nuns, freed from their ugly, cumbersome habits by the Second Vatican Council, Sister Catherine dressed in the fashion of women of her age. But she drew the line at some of the clothes being worn by younger nuns. Shorts were simply inappropriate for nuns.

Many years back, Sister Catherine had been led astray by G. K. Chesterton, one of the Church's most revered lay personages, and by the enthusiastic endorsement of the late Father O'Malley, longtime pastor of St. Mark's in Hillsdale. A nun led astray by two pillars of the Church? That's requires an immediate explanation.

Here it is. One fine summer Saturday, Sister Catherine stopped in to inspect the books on sale at the Hillsdale Library Volunteers annual book sale. She was looking for something with a religious theme. She found a somewhat battered book entitled *The Innocence of Father Brown* by G. K. Chesterton.

Perhaps it's akin to the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine, she thought. But the cover puzzled her.

It pictured a black-garbed priest—a short, chubby, nondescript looking chap with “a face as round and dull as a Norfolk pudding and eyes as empty as the North Sea.” He was standing on a deserted train platform in a rural area, studying what appeared to be a timetable. He seemed befuddled.

Somewhat perplexed, Sister Catherine bought the book, paying fifteen cents, marked down from the original eighty-five cents when it was published in 1911. The fifteen-cent price was probably the lowest ever paid for a work of Chesterton, who until his death in 1936 was one of England's most prolific and most renowned writers. Though he wrote essays, biographies, novels, poetry, he is best known for his short stories featuring the little priest detective from Essex, Father Brown.

That evening, in the second floor dormitory in the convent that she shared with nine other nuns, Sister Catherine, after lights out, pulled the sheet over her head, turned on her little flashlight, and began reading. There were twelve stories in the book, and by the time Sister Catherine had finished the first two (“The Blue Cross” and “The Sign of the Broken Sword”), she was hooked for life.

Father Brown, whose vague demeanor and incongruous figure lulled criminals into believing him a harmless dunderhead, proved to be the equal of Arthur Conan Doyle's erudite detective, Sherlock



Holmes, whom no one ever mistook for a harmless dunderhead.

Sister Catherine would have loved to keep on reading—next up was “The Sins of Prince Saradine,” awfully tempting—but she had already broken the lights out rule (no talking, no reading) and God help her if Sister Felicity, a holy terror, the head nun who had her own room down the hall, caught her.

(Sister Felicity had to be the most misnamed nun who ever came down the pike. More on her later, back to Sister Catherine.)

The book closed, Sister Catherine had a terrible time getting to sleep. She was too exhilarated, too excited. And it troubled her. Experiencing worldly pleasure must be a sin. She prayed that it was only a venial sin.

Next day was Sunday. Father O'Malley heard the nuns' confessions before seven o'clock Mass. Nuns going to confession? What possible sins could they have? Very few, mostly evil thoughts about Sister Felicity, dreams in which they pushed her off a cliff or threw her under a streetcar. Dear Father O'Malley, universally beloved, almost (“about as much backbone as a banana peel” in Sister Felicity's opinion), understood. He himself had often dreamt of giving Sister Felicity a little shove.

But Sister Catherine had a real sin to confess. Not only had she willfully violated a strict convent rule by reading after lights out, but her reading had not been of a religious nature. In a shaky voice she confessed her sin.

“And even though the person

who outwitted the criminals, Father, was a priest just like you,” she whispered, “I experienced such elation, such worldly pleasure due to the stories, that I must have sinned.”

Father O'Malley, who had been only half listening as was his wont lately, perked up.

“Oh, you've found Chesterton's little priest detective, Father Brown, Sister. How exciting for you. And though you may have been a bit remiss in violating one of Sister Felicity's rules—and I must admit they are onerous—you did not sin by reading the Father Brown stories. Catholicism is not all gloom and doom, Sister. You are permitted a reasonable amount of pleasure.”

About there, as he told himself later, he should have stopped, given Sister Catherine a minimal penance, one Our Father, one Hail Mary, but he didn't stop. He himself was an avid mystery reader and had read all the Sherlock Holmes stories, all of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers up to that date. He found the intellectual challenge that mysteries provided a welcome respite from the manifold duties of his calling.

“When you've finished with that volume, Sister,” he went on enthusiastically, “you must get the other volumes. I'm sure the library has them. Then, above all, start on Christie. Most of her wonderful mysteries are of the cosy, manor house type: someone dies, but there is a minimum of bloodshed. She favors poison and—” He suddenly stopped. Good heavens, what's come over me? he thought. The con-



fessional booth is hardly the place for recommending crime stories to a young nun.

"But you must not neglect your religious reading, Sister," he added lamely. "For your penance say one Our Father, one Hail Mary. Now make a sincere act of contrition."

Which Sister Catherine did with gusto, the reading of mysteries having been given the imprimatur of a representative of Holy Mother Church. It's a strange world. Dear Father O'Malley's love of mysteries, his telling a young nun it was not a sin to read them, was one of the first links in a long chain of events that culminated many years later in the death of a feeble old nun who wouldn't have been within three miles of where she died if Sister Catherine weren't such a dedicated good Samaritan. Wee Sister Mary Bridget would have eventually—soon—been rewarded with a peaceful, gentle passing if Sister Catherine, with the best intentions, had never bought *The Innocence of Father Brown*, and if Father O'Malley had not, long before, been seduced by Miss Marple and her fellow bewitchers.

For Sister Catherine was at the library that fatal day to steal a march on other Hillsdale readers who had fallen under the spell of Heather Millway, a bestselling author of English manor house mysteries. Millway had a large following in Hillsdale as well as in the whole United States. She had great plots, lots of humor, plenty of eccentric characters, but it was her protagonist who drew the readers.

He was young, handsome, care-

free Constable Timothy Dawdling, a local lad with winning ways, very little ambition, happy in his rural bailiwick, his chief worry being that if he solved one more crime his high-and-mighty supervisors from divisional headquarters fouled up he would be forced to accept promotion, be transferred to Bath or Bristol, or—heaven forbid—to Scotland Yard in madhouse London. It would break his happy-go-lucky heart to leave his beloved Cornish patch of little seaside villages and the bevy of village wenches who outdid one another in plying him with home-cooked meals, lots of dessert.

Sister Catherine had a confederate at the library, Marge, who a year back, aware of Sister Catherine's fondness for Millway mysteries, had told her she would put aside the next Millway mystery that came in, give Sister Catherine first crack at it. Sister Catherine thought it over—for about ten seconds—told Marge that would be great.

Thus, when *Another Bungled Case*—number fourteen in the series—arrived that Monday morning, Marge phoned Sister Catherine.

"I can keep it off the shelf until two o'clock, Sister," Marge told her.

"I'll be there around one thirty, and thanks, Marge," Sister Catherine said, a wee bit ashamed of herself but, since she was a fast reader, she would have the book back in two days. Her conscience bought that, agreeing that a little duplicity was far overbalanced by her many good deeds.



Monday was a regular day to visit the nursing home that was operated by the order and served as a retirement and nursing home for old nuns from a five county area. She was at the home by twelve thirty, in time to help feed several of the more incapacitated nuns. Ordinarily she stayed at least two hours, doing her best to bring a little cheer into the sad lives of the poor old nuns, but this Monday she got up to go at one fifteen. Fate intervened in the person of Sister Raphael, the home's supervisor and one fine human being.

"It's Sister Mary Bridget, Sister," Sister Raphael said, "The poor old dear, it's been years since she's been away from the home for even a few minutes, and she keeps trying the doors, wanting to get out. Would you mind taking her for a little ride? She's not long for this world, I'm afraid."

Sister Catherine hesitated, visualizing the library with its unlocked doors, no place for a wandering nun, but, as she looked at Sister Mary Bridget perched on the edge of a couch, a little bird that could no longer fly, the tears welled in her eyes, and she said she'd be happy to take her for a short ride.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the sage of Concord, wrote in "The Conduct of Life" (1860) that "men are what their mothers made them." Nurture, the influence of a caring, fostering mother and not Nature—heredity—is what determines a child's development, ultimate social behavior, even success or failure in adulthood. That theory, com-

ing from such a distinguished person as Emerson, gained acceptance in all strata of society and remained unchallenged until very recently.

Alas, poor mom, she's being belittled by a barrage of writing that insists she has minimal influence in her offspring's upbringing. One's genes—Nature—and peer pressure, outside-the-home associates, are the forces that mold children.

Emerson would not have needed to worry about being unable to defend himself, for in the case of Joseph Patrick Callighan III he hit the nail right smack on the head. His mother nurtured her son relentlessly, showered him with such tenacious devotion from the day he was born until the day she died when he was thirty-four years old that she turned him into a shy, sad, reclusive, brilliant human being who, when her death finally released him from her benevolent governance, would find a few precious years of happiness, only to suddenly erupt into frightful violence, the mad explosion triggered by searing memories of his agonizing life.

Good heavens, what kind of awful creature was she, an ogre, a monster, a wicked witch? No, none of those. Mrs. Callighan was an intelligent, well-educated woman, a generous if careful contributor to many worthy causes, who was haunted by the knowledge that she was finally going to have to allow her precious son to go off on his own but who kept postponing that dreaded day long after she should have. By the time she died, Nature had won an inglorious victory, for



there is good nurture and the other kind.

Freudians would surely label Mrs. Callighan's implacable hold over her son as an unnatural obsession. Maybe it was, but there was ample justification for her actions. She had suffered three horrible tragedies, had lost many loved ones, her boy was all she had left. She was determined to nurture him, protect him, and cherish him for as long as possible.

The first tragedy occurred in October 1946. Twenty-six-year-old Eleanor O'Brien, a tall brunette beauty (a late bloomer; she'd been a miserably shy, painfully tall, woe-fully skinny teenager) was in the third week of her first year as an English teacher at Hillsdale High School. A graduate of Penn State—highest honors—she had taught eighth grade for five years before being appointed to the high school. Life was wonderful; she had never been happier.

She was madly in love with Joe—Joseph Patrick Callighan, Jr.—and he with her. The only scion of the wealthy Callighans, Joe was six feet two, weighed one hundred ninety-five pounds, had been a four-letter man in college, was a recently honorably discharged war hero, having flown sixty missions with the Army Air Force in the South Pacific, had won many medals.

Since both Eleanor and Joe were the same age and came from devout Catholic families, they had been in the same class all through St. Mark's parochial school, had seen each other daily, even had exchanged a few words now and then.

But that was as far as it had gone, Eleanor shrinking from talking to boys.

Following grade school Eleanor had continued at St. Mark's High while Joe enrolled in a prestigious New England prep school, spent his summers at a Maine camp. He had gone to one of the better small New England colleges, where he became one of the school's all time sports heroes. Summers between college were spent in rugged adventure out West, climbing mountains, kayaking on white water rivers, staying in shape for the coming football season.

Since Hillsdale was a small city, Eleanor saw Joe once in a while from a distance when he was home between school and camp, all too often when he was driving his spiffy red convertible, a local lovely sharing the seat with him. But it wasn't until May 1946 that they met again, for the first time since eighth grade.

The encounter began unpropitiously. Eleanor, having assured herself that the way was clear, was backing out of a parking space near Robertson's Book Store, where she had purchased Faulkner's latest chronicle of the mad goings-on in Yoknapatawpha County, when she bumped into something. She stopped and jumped out of the car as did the other driver, Joe Callighan, driving a battered pickup, the red convertible too precious to be hauling kegs of nails, window frames, and cans of gasoline.

Ready to admit that it was his fault—he had spied a vacant spot ahead in front of Pearson's Hard-



ware—Joe came face to face with a gorgeous, dark-haired girl, let out a kind of gulping “eek.” Eleanor was equally as affected. She tried to say something, only managed a weak gasp.

But it didn’t matter, destiny had already spoken. He finally found his voice.

“I . . . ah . . . that is . . . I didn’t expect to . . . to,” he stammered. “What I’m trying to say is that it’s my fault, and there’s no damage done to this wreck.”

“Oh,” was all Eleanor could manage. Still in a kind of daze, they exchanged insurance cards. He looked at hers, she at his. She knew who he was, but he had to look at the card twice, then back at her, and then said in a disbelieving voice, “You’re Eleanor O’Brien from St. Mark’s Grade School. You’re her?”

“I’m she,” she said, instinctively, as befitted an English teacher.

So began the glorious summer of 1946. They saw each other nearly every evening, went to the movies at least twice a week, to the Saturday night dances at the country club, picnicked in the mountains at Paradise Lake on Sundays, always paying a long visit to the summer camp that Joe was building, Joe proudly showing Eleanor the progress being made.

The camp was an inspiration of Joe’s father, Joseph Patrick Callighan, Sr., J. P. to one and all, he and his wife Rose anxious to keep Joe nearby once he graduated. But since J. P. had sold the mine and coke ovens in 1939—a group of Pittsburgh investors made an offer

he couldn’t refuse—there was no family business for Joe to take over. Besides, he loved sports, especially football, had often said that he hoped to become an assistant coach at a small college when he graduated, work his way up. But J. P. remembered a remark Joe had made when he came home from the West before his junior year.

“You remember, Rose, his saying that summer camps are great institutions. They not only build muscle, they build character.” Rose remembered Joe’s saying that. “Well, listen to what I have in mind, see what you think.”

What J. P. had in mind was a summer camp for boys on a large tract of timberland that he still owned in the mountains. Originally bought to supply pitprops—posts to hold up mine roofs—there was still an enormous amount of timberland. The tract bordered the Youghiogheny River, was within walking distance of the Yough Gorge, one of the best whitewater rafting places in all of Appalachia. Joe had run the rapids many times.

“And it’s only two miles from Paradise Lake,” continued J. P. getting more excited by the minute. “Ideal for swimming and canoeing. I’ll admit that Dunbar’s Knob is no Pike’s Peak but it’s a tough climb, and once you make it to the top, the view can knock your eyes out. Honestly, Rose, I think Joe’ll believe it’s a great idea.”

“I hope so,” said Rose. “It would be wonderful to have him with us for a few years.”

Joe came home from the West in August 1941, tanned, in great con-



dition, eager to start his senior year at college (he'd been elected captain of the football team) anticipating an undefeated season: most of last year's 8-1 team would be back.

J. P. wasted no time. Right after breakfast on Joe's first day home, with Rose by his side, her fingers crossed, she having already beseeched St. Jude, patron saint of hopeless causes, J. P. told Joe about the camp.

Joe was overwhelmed.

"Holy Smoke, Pop," he exulted, "What a great idea. How did you ever think of it. Why, that place has everything you could want for a summer camp. The Yough Gorge alone is enough to make it unique. Imagine my owning a summer camp only fifteen miles from here. I'm simply . . . overwhelmed."

It was agreed. J. P. would deed the tract to Joe, provide whatever money was needed to make it a first-rate camp. It would be a present from J. P. and . . . but Joe insisted on signing a note.

"Whatever you say, Joe," J. P. said as Rose uncrossed her fingers and thanked St. Jude.

"I'll start the first day back after graduation next June," Joe said enthusiastically. "I can hardly wait."

He had a long wait, Pearl Harbor interfering (Joe had enlisted in June 1942, right after graduation). Thus, it wasn't until the snow melted in the spring of 1946 that work began on the camp. Great progress was being made when Eleanor backed into Joe's pickup that memorable day in May 1946.

The summer of 1946 passed in

love and laughter; all summer long every time they saw one another after a brief separation, icy fingers ran up and down their sturdy spines (it was one of the hottest summers in history), butterflies fluttered in their stomachs, their hearts thumped.

Autumn came, and the trees in the mountains glowed in a dozen different shades of red and orange, gold and silver. Then the leaves began to fall, the land echoed with the poet's mournful words:

"The melancholy days are come,
the saddest of the year,
Of wailing winds, and naked
woods, and meadows brown
and sere."

But not for Eleanor; she embraced the melancholy days with open arms, a song in her heart, a smile on her lips. Her fear that she would not measure up to high school teaching had proved groundless; classes were going very well. She and Joe were more in love than ever, the camp had made great strides, Joe planned to keep the crew working until the snow fell. Life had never been sweeter.

Then the first tragedy. Eleanor was at home correcting test papers when her parents, driving home from a downtown restaurant, were killed when a drunken driver with a suspended license and three previous citations for being under the influence ran a stop sign at fifty miles an hour, plowed into the O'Brien car, demolishing it. Her parents died at the scene.

Time, we are told, heals all



wounds; well-meaning but not entirely true. Some wounds never heal. In the case of the drunken driver, his wounds—a broken right arm, a lacerated forehead, a funny noise in both ears (the poor man)—all healed long before he was released from prison after serving seven years of a ten year sentence.

Grief is more agonizing than physical wounds. Eleanor's grief was so excruciating that she could not have coped without the constant support of the Callighans. They seldom left her alone for long, Rose even moving in with her for the first three weeks, Eleanor having no living relatives.

October passed, a bleak, gray month of wailing winds and naked woods. Pale, sad, but knowing that life must go on, Eleanor returned to her teaching job in early November, a substitute having filled in for her.

The years crept by, made bearable due to Joe, Rose, and J. P., dinners at the Callighans' on Sundays and holidays, Rose phoning her every day, and dear Joe never missing a day without seeing her, even if only long enough to hug her, kiss her, tell her he loved her with all his heart.

By October 1949 Camp Youghioheny—two years in the making—had completed its second successful season, and Eleanor was living in a five room apartment on a leafy street, having sold the dear old house where she had grown up. It held too many memories, every inch a piercing reminder of happier days.

School had helped. Drawing on some inner strength, she made her

classes as interesting as possible, and the students responded. But alone in her apartment the inner strength often faltered. Long after the horrible tragedy she was still crying herself to sleep at night, awakening in the morning knowing she would never see her beloved parents again. Many times while she cooked a bleak breakfast the tears dripped into the pancake batter, and no matter how meticulously she followed Mom's other recipes, nothing tasted like Mom's.

Gradually Joe and Eleanor began to talk about the future, marriage. Finally a date was set: September 1950 after the camp session was over. J. P. and Rose were jubilant on hearing the news, and for more than one reason. Unlike most Irish families in the area, where seven or eight offspring was normal and twelve to fifteen not unusual, J. P. and Rose had produced only Joe.

Of course, they *had* married late, and as Rose once said, "It's God's will."

But now, with two such superlative specimens as Joe and Eleanor, there could be as many as six or seven grandchildren for J. P. and Rose to spoil before the old folks were called to a better world. Alas; it was not to be.

The second tragedy came on a foggy, drizzly night in early November 1949. Coming down the long grade from the Lookout Hotel, the resort atop the highest point in Ashford County, J. P. and Rose were in a mellow mood following a delicious steak dinner topped with champagne when two deer sudden-



ly leaped onto the road and froze, blinded by the car's lights.

"Brace yourself," J. P. yelled as he flung his right arm out to protect Rose, wrenched the steering wheel hard left, slammed on the brakes. He missed the deer, but the car skidded on the wet road, careened into the guardrail on the left and tore it loose, went plunging into the rocky ravine far below, killing them instantly.

Horatio Alger, Jr. (1832-1899), wrote at least one hundred Rags to Riches books, the formula never changing: ragamuffin boys, either orphaned or a weeping widowed mother in tow (*Tattered Tom; Jed, the Poorhouse Boy; Ragged Dick; Tom, the Bootblack*)—"sanctimonious little frauds" as one cynic put it—made it to the top of the ladder through Pluck and Luck before they were even old enough to vote.

It had taken J. P. a little longer, but he had all the attributes of Alger's up-by-their-bootstraps urchins and his were real. Orphaned at fourteen (his parents and five siblings were wiped out in a flu epidemic), he got a job on a coal tippie, took correspondence courses in mining and went into the coal business. At his death Joe inherited an estate valued at eleven million dollars that included the eighteen room mansion with its huge library. (Up to the day of her death, Rose—assisted by Mrs. Patterson the housekeeper and a maid, both of whom came in six days a week—had kept the place in spic and span condition. Rose even helped the other two clean the windows, for

rich as she was she never put on airs.)

Once again the marriage was postponed. Joe had lost his beloved parents, Eleanor had lost her second parents. The tears came again at night, she awoke in the morning knowing she had to face another sad day.

In May of 1951 Joe brought up the subject again. ("After all, honey, we're not getting any younger.") A new date was set: September 1951. Eleanor resigned her teaching job—reluctantly, but the future promised to make her forget it soon.

They were married the day after the camp closed—another great season—a quiet wedding at St. Mark's, Father O'Malley saying the nuptial mass.

They honeymooned in Ireland, came home happier than they had been for a long time, looking forward to a long life surrounded by three or four children. "That's the limit," Eleanor said, though she wasn't sure she meant it.

"We'll let nature take its course," Joe said with a big grin.

Which nature did. Great news a little before Christmas. Dr. Jefferies, the Callighan physician, told Eleanor that she was three months pregnant. Joe was on cloud nine. Number one was on the way. It was a wonderful Christmas, a lovely spring, everything going fine according to Dr. Jefferies.

Booked solid, the camp got ready to open for the season. Saturday, June eighth was opening day, with the baby due to arrive around the fourteenth or fifteenth. A problem arose. The tenth anniversary of



Joe's college graduating class was scheduled for the weekend of June ninth, and Joe was being bombarded with demands that he attend. No excuses; after all, he'd been big man on campus, the greatest athlete in school history, captain of the undefeated football team in his senior year. He had to come, even if for only a day.

He went, both Eleanor and Dr. Jefferies insisting that he would be back long before the baby was due and the camp director saying he could handle things while Joe was gone. Thus, Friday afternoon Joe hugged his wife—she hugged him—left for the Pittsburgh airport, and flew out of her life forever.

Doctor Jefferies had erred. ("It happens once in a while," he told Eleanor ruefully.) Joseph Patrick Callighan III, a little squirt at six pounds, two ounces, emerged into the world at exactly four twenty-four on Saturday afternoon, June eighth, 1952, a bare ten minutes after his stalwart father, the perfect athlete, died of a heat stroke right after winning the hundred yard sack race, the last event of a hideously hot day with both bonhomie and beer flowing freely.

That evening, the stout fellows—stunned, shocked, sobered—gathered at Ye Old Tavern, the hallowed town hangout, and hoisted solemn brews in memory of the greatest athlete in school history, everyone thinking, Joe, of all people. Wow, it's a crazy world.

Eleanor O'Brien Callighan was thirty-two, a tall, striking, rich widow with one child, an inheritance of

many millions (taxes had reduced what Joe had inherited), and a heart broken beyond repair. She would live another thirty-five years, never again laughing as she had so many times during that wonderful summer of 1946 (she and Joe holding hands at the movies, erupting in wild glee as Laurel and Hardy or the Marx Brothers wrought delirious havoc, reel after reel). Once in a great while something like a zany *I Love Lucy* episode on TV would cause her lips to twitch, a bleak smile would form, quickly vanish.

Joseph Patrick Callighan III, offspring of two very intelligent, superb physical specimens, had inherited their brains, not their brawn. Which his mother accepted. Look what had happened to his wonderful, rugged father. She was determined to turn him into a brilliant person, visualizing a Nobel Prize in some field.

To that end she taught him so far beyond other children of his age that when it came time for grade school she planned to have him skip at least three grades but changed her mind in the end, for he was a little beanpole and would be no match for the larger boys in fourth grade. Reluctantly she decided that skipping first grade would be the limit. Though she had lost much of her once firm religious belief, she was still a practicing Catholic, still contributed generously to St. Mark's. She selected St. Mark's Grade School mainly because of recent incidents of rowdiness in the public grade school. Discipline seemed to be lacking.

Not at St. Mark's. Grim-faced



Sister Felicity—the principal in addition to her convent duties—a burly, spine-chilling, black-robed spectre with the kind of eyes that could quail a wild beast at eight paces, had delegated the teaching to the other nuns. She devoted her own time to prowling the halls, sneaking into the back of classrooms, peeping from behind the lilac bushes at the playground at recess. Woe betide the unfortunate miscreant who fell afoul of her.

But woe betide was not what it used to be. It had suffered a crippling blow three years back when the new bishop issued an edict banning corporal punishment in all schools in the diocese. Fuming at the namby-pambyness of such an edict, Sister Felicity nevertheless sheathed the lethal yellow ruler that she had wielded so effectively on countless cringing palms and knuckles. She put it in her belt for all to see. That, and those fiery eyes, were enough to maintain strict order.

In late August 1958, her precious son now six years old, Eleanor phoned Father O'Malley, requesting a conference with him and Sister Felicity. It was held in the rectory, Eleanor dominating. She said that she had decided that since her son was such a precocious child, he could skip first grade, even though he was qualified to skip several higher grades. But since he was a frail child, his being with much older, much stronger boys might prove harmful, and she had chosen to start him in second grade.

One more thing, she said as she closed the abbreviated conference

during which she brooked no interruption from an outraged Sister Felicity: in the unlikely event that her son unintentionally broke one of the school's rules, he was not—not, she emphasized—to be reprimanded. She was to be phoned. She would handle it.

With that she arose, as did Father O'Malley. He held the door open for her, took a deep breath, reentered the lion's den prepared for the worst. It came. How dare that woman dictate to us, who does she think she is, just because she's rich she thinks . . . et cetera . . . et cetera . . . snarling, stuttering in her fury, mad as hell. Poor Father O'Malley, head down, silently praying. ("Help me, Lord, help me." Which the Lord did.)

Sister Felicity—red-faced, about to explode—had to pause for breath. The phone rang. Father O'Malley grabbed it. It was the hospital. Ninety-four-year-old Mrs. O'Shaunessey was dying, calling for the last rites. Father O'Malley raced into the other room, grabbed his little black bag containing the anointing oil and the missal, and beat it, leaving Sister Felicity to choke in her rage.

On the way to the hospital Father O'Malley was thinking that this would be the third time he had administered the last rites to Mrs. O'Shaunessey. Miraculously, she had recovered the other two times. Not this time. This would be the dear old soul's last last rites.

Sister Felicity was a sore loser. Vowing vengeance (no child had skipped first grade in her reign) she tortured poor pipsqueakish Jo-



seph Patrick unremittingly, staring at him with those fierce eyes, never acknowledging his cringing "Good morning, Sister" when he encountered her as he entered school each morning.

Come seventh grade, Joseph Patrick still woefully skinny, his mother came up with a brilliant idea. Like many kids who lived near the school, Joseph Patrick came home for lunch, a meal loaded with foods calculated to make him put on weight, carefully prepared by Mrs. Patterson. All to no avail. He was a picky eater, his appetite for books exceeding that of his stomach.

"Oh, Mother, Mother," the horrified boy wailed on being told what she had in mind, "You can't mean it. I'm to go to the convent during my study period and drink a quart of milk? Why go to the convent? I'll be home at noon. Why can't I drink it then?"

That would mean he would have to give up something else, probably the two tablespoons of cod liver oil.

"But, Mother, you don't understand. The other kids will tease the life out of me. They already taunt me for being a show-off. Which I'm not." (He wasn't. In spite of cowering down in his seat, never holding up his hand to answer a question, he couldn't hide the fact that he was brilliant.)

"Now, dear, you're getting too upset. The other pupils won't find out. I'm going to phone Father O'Malley, explain that this must be conducted in utmost secrecy. After all, Joseph, Mother knows best."

Poor Father O'Malley, on being informed of the milk project, could

only shake his head and moan, "Wait'll Her Nibs hears about this."

Her Nibs reacted true to form, right on the button, furious, her final slug of nastiness as she stomped from the rectory: "Why don't you just turn in your vestments, Father? Let that woman run the parish."

Again the dear priest shook his head, thinking as he had so many times in the past that she must have had a miserable childhood, the poor woman.

After supper that evening Sister Felicity, in a vile mood, informed the other nuns of the impending project. Haggerty's Dairy would be delivering an additional five quarts of milk a week to the convent, beginning this coming Monday. The five quarts were for the Callighan boy. He would come to the convent at ten thirty during his study hour, drink a quart. This undertaking was to be conducted in utmost secrecy; the other pupils must not know of it. *Must not know*. Was that understood?

It sure was, absolutely. That was the easy part; Sister Mary Bridget—usually the only nun in the convent in the morning—would require a more intensive explanation. In her sixties, the dear nun had taught grammar almost from the day it had been invented. Once supreme in infinitives and participles, a whiz with the transitive and the intransitive, the dear little nun had been banished to the convent scullery two years back following a series of peculiar memory lapses, climaxing one memorable morning when she stood in front of her class,



pale and tongue-tied, having forgotten the conjugation of the verb "to be."

The other nuns duly warned, Sister Felicity went into the kitchen where Sister Mary Bridget, humming happily to herself, was diligently scouring the spaghetti pan. Sister Felicity had her sit down, patiently explained to her about the five extra quarts of milk. She went over it time after time.

"Now, you do understand, don't you, Sister?" she finally asked. "Not a word of this must leave the convent. It is our secret."

Of course she understood, Sister Mary Bridget said, bristling. Why wouldn't she? That was Wednesday. By Monday she had forgotten most of what she had been told.

Monday arrived; the milkman did his part, five extra quarts in their own wooden container along with the convent's supply in its container. The milkman rang the doorbell as usual and departed. Sister Mary Bridget heard the bell, went to the door, saw the two containers. Quite puzzled she made two trips, put the milk in the large refrigerator, sat down, pondered the extra quarts. It finally came to her. Of course. They were for the Callaghan child.

Pleased with having solved the mystery, Sister Mary Bridget took a quart from the refrigerator, hurried across the street to the school. Luck was with her. She found a forlorn-looking boy standing in a corner, his face to the wall, being punished for some minor infraction.

"The Callaghan child?" he said, turning around, "Oh, you must

mean Joseph Patrick. It's his history class, the second room on the left around the corner, Sister."

"Bless you, my child, God be with you," the dear nun said as she sped around the corner.

It was winter at Valley Forge in the history class. Things were not going well with Washington's rag-tag army. There was no food, no shoes, no shelter, no pay, no hope. "And," said Sister Catherine, who had history that day, "a blizzard was brewing."

The blizzard was put on hold. The big door in the rear of the classroom burst open, squeaking loudly as usual. Heads turned en masse. There stood Sister Mary Bridget, the quart of milk raised high.

"Callaghan child," she bellowed triumphantly, "your milk is here."

Thunderous silence . . . then pandemonium; howls, shrieks, squeals, hoots, reaching a crescendo just as Sister Felicity, doing her bang-up job of keeping a tight rein on law and order, rushed in, nearly colliding with both Sister Mary Bridget and Joseph Patrick, he running madly from the room, tears falling.

While Sister Felicity was up front demanding an explanation from the bewildered Sister Catherine, Sister Mary Bridget left, taking the quart of milk with her, flinging another "God be with you" at the kid in the corner as she raced by.

Five minutes later poor Sister Catherine, face red, voice trembling, not yet recovered from the scorching tongue-lashing, bravely resumed, "Then came the blizzard. The revolution seemed doomed."



By then Joseph Patrick had made it home, collapsed just inside the front door. Mrs. Patterson, hearing the door open, investigated.

"Oh my Lord, Joseph Patrick, what's wrong?"

He sobbed that he wanted his mother. Mrs. Patterson ran to the room off the library that Eleanor used as her office. Eleanor came racing out. He sobbed out the hideous story. Biting her tongue to keep from swearing, she soothed him, helped him upstairs, waited until he had flopped down on his bed, then acted. She phoned Father O'Malley, a conference in twenty minutes, be certain that Sister Felicity is there.

When everyone was on hand, tension high, Sister Felicity's sullen face a fiery red that made her black habit even blacker and poor Father O'Malley telling himself to be stoic, two points were made by Mrs. Callighan:

Point one; due to the rank mis-handling of a simple little operation, the milk program would be abandoned.

Point two; if she ever heard the slightest hint that her son was being taunted, teased, made fun of because of the incompetence of those responsible, she would go straight to the bishop and apprise him of the ineptitude of the entire St. Mark's administration.

She stood up. Father O'Malley escorted her to the door, saw her out, hesitated (even stoicism has its limits), crept out, gently closed the door, and raced madly across the lawn to the church, his cassock billowing behind him. He ran down

the far aisle, hid in the darkened confessional booth.

Sister Felicity, the fuse lit, suddenly realizing that the cowardly man of God had flown the coop, jumped up and ran across the lawn, sparks flying in all directions. Poor Father O'Malley, seeking sanctuary in the most sacred of places, crouched against the wall of the confessional booth as Sister Felicity stalked the aisles peering into every pew, went behind the altar, into the vestry, even up to the choir loft. Out of breath, she sank down on the organ bench, huffed and puffed for at least ten minutes. Finally, fearing levity in the school, she got up, lurched over there.

Later that evening Eleanor telephoned Father O'Malley and apologized, saying she was aware of what he had to contend with. The dear priest said that there was no need to apologize. He understood. As for Sister Felicity, "We all have a cross to bear in this life, Mrs. Callighan, and while mine is not the easiest of burdens, it is as nothing compared to yours. I pray for you every day."

When Eleanor put down the phone, the tears came as she recalled that heavenly summer when God had blessed her so bountifully. How her life had changed. But as heavy as her cross was, she had someone to sustain her. Without her precious son it would be unbearable.

Her precious son, for whom life was barely bearable, spent the rest of the sixth grade and all of the seventh and eighth cowering and cringing under "Callighan child,



your milk is here” when Sister Felicity was out of range.

It finally ended. He departed St. Mark’s with perfect grades, free of his black-robed tormentor, for St. Mark’s no longer had a high school. Fewer applicants (many families could no longer pay the tuition) and fewer nuns (they were becoming a vanishing species) had forced the parish to close the high school five years before.

Hillsdale High was the only option, and since it had a large enrollment, less attention was paid to him. Still, every once in a while, the hated taunt (“Callighan child, your milk is here”) echoed through the corridors, shouted by a boy or girl who had been with him at St. Mark’s. But bad as it was, it was better than St. Mark’s. Sister Felicity wasn’t there; in fact, she’d gone to her eternal reward—the poor woman—in a manner befitting her lifelong temperament, having suffered a fatal heart attack while flailing away in a wild frenzy with her once trusty ruler at a terrified little mouse that had leaped through a small hole in the back door screen, seeking sanctuary from a monstrous black alley cat.

Rusty from lack of practice, Sister Felicity lost the battle, collapsing in mid-swing. The little mouse, its heart pounding, leaped back out through the hole and hit the road, thinking, “Holy Smoke, what the hell was that?”

Less than two months after Sister Felicity went to wherever she went, Father O’Malley died in his sleep, went straight to heaven, no detours. He was succeeded by Fa-

ther Andrew Ruskowski, one of the young priests who had been coming to St. Mark’s in recent years to take on some of Father O’Malley’s load. Though Sister Felicity had only had limited contact with Father Ruskowski, it was more than enough for her to brand him as “another wishy-washer.” Wow, she was one tough cookie.

Though his black-robed tormentor was gone from his life, she had made a lasting impression, a diabolic impression, on Joseph Patrick. It would eventually lead to his tragic downfall.

Following his junior year—perfect grades as usual—Joseph Patrick and his mother began discussing where he would go to college. Timidly, in his by-now deferential manner, he had mentioned Penn State as the school he’d like to attend. After all it was her own alma mater. Yes, it was, but unfortunately it was not his mother’s idea of a proper place for her sixteen-year-old innocent. Exposing him to skimpy-skirted seductresses was anathema.

Bowing to the inevitable, he accepted her choice, a small Jesuit college in rural Maryland, strictly male, only ninety miles from Hillsdale (she intended to visit him every weekend).

Again, as they had for the past three summers, mother and son went to Europe, visited the museums, soaking up culture; she taking time from her rigorous pursuit of investment opportunities (stocks, bonds, undeveloped acreage near large cities). Since the death of beloved Joe, she had abandoned all



social life, devoted her time—secondary to caring for her son—to augmenting her inheritance. The summers in Europe every year meant that the few friends Joseph Patrick had eventually drifted away from him. They were red-blooded kids, full of life, who loved to play baseball, go swimming, climb Dunbar's Knob, none of which appealed to poor mollicod-dled Joseph Patrick.

Back from Europe, the time had arrived to cut the Gordian knot at last, embark on a new life, a life he viewed both apprehensively and hopefully. He was in the library reading the *New York Times* (the mail had just been delivered) when his mother appeared in the doorway, clutching her bosom.

"I have a peculiar feeling in my chest, Joseph," she said with just a hint of concern. "Would you mind phoning Dr. Jefferies?"

He turned pale, uttered a high-pitched squeal, leaped up, fell over a chair, jumped up, and ran to the phone.

Dr. Jefferies said there was no reason for concern, merely a temporary increase in blood pressure, understandable under the circumstances. But he didn't mention that last, for he felt sorry for her. She had suffered more than her share of tragedy, was about to lose the child she had nurtured so intensely. Dr. Jefferies felt sorry for her son, too.

Her son, still upset, walked Dr. Jefferies to the front door.

"You're certain, doctor," he said, "that Mother's attack is not a precursor of a much more pernicious

problem? Shouldn't I forego college, remain home with her?"

Oh boy, thought Dr. Jefferies, you poor kid, you'd better watch your language when you go to college. Words like "pernicious" and "precursor" are not likely to help you get ahead. But the good doctor kept that to himself, and he answered Joseph Patrick, "Good heavens, lad, of course you shouldn't stay home. Your mother's in fine shape; this was merely a temporary fluctuation in blood pressure. Nothing to worry about. Why, it wouldn't surprise me if she lived well into her nineties. Go to college, begin enjoying life."

Joseph Patrick stayed home. After all, his mother was forty-eight, which to a naive genius was pretty far down the other side, Dr. Jefferies notwithstanding. That evening he asked her if she would mind if he waited another year before going to college.

She was overjoyed, barely concealed it.

"That's a splendid idea, dear, just splendid. It'll give you time to become more mature. And I just thought of something. Why don't you start adding to your grandfather's rare book collection? We can afford it, and I'm sure you'll find it a fascinating hobby."

That was that; each breathed a sigh of relief. But that night Eleanor didn't sleep well. I'm a horrible mother, she sobbed, awful, terrible. I'm not being fair to him, I'm holding him back. But he's all I have. I cannot, *I will* not, allow anything to happen to him.

Her son became an enthusiastic



bibliomane, so much so that when a rare book dealer phoned to say, for instance, that he had just received one of the only two known extant autographed copies of *By Yak Across the Great Gobi*, Lady Penelope Boxwood's (she was a famous feminist, delighted in outraging the masculine establishment) thrilling account of her 1864 trek via yak across the unexplored Mongolian desert, Joseph Patrick would feel a sudden quickening of the heart similar to that which hits a normal male when he looks up, spies a ravishing creature across a crowded room. If Freud were still around, he would have grabbed paper and pen, dashed off a couple of hundred pages on the harm that over-zealous mothers can do to their offspring, or something like that.

Another summer, another trip to Europe, the museums beginning to lose out to bookstores, he so thrilled with a half dozen rare books that he actually gained a whole pound during the trip while his mother—glad to see him so engrossed in his new hobby—gained seven pounds. She was becoming quite Junoesque, regal, stately, an almost imperious presence, her big hats (she never went out without a hat) further adding to her majestic stature, none of which discouraged an array of suitors both at home and abroad. After all, in addition to being an attractive woman still, abundantly feminine, she was a widow, a rich widow.

She spurned them all. There would never be anyone like her wonderful Joe. She talked to him at night. ("Yes, darling, I sold the

camp. I never went there after you were gone.") She followed his old college. ("They still talk about you, darling. You're a legend. There's never been another four-letter winner since you.") But she couldn't bring herself to tell him anything about their son. She was afraid he would be disappointed.

Back from Europe, seventeen now, college a few weeks away, Joseph Patrick, trying to convince himself that once he got to college he would find his niche but not really believing it—was in the library leafing through the illustrated edition of the *Tale of the Tub* that he had bought at a dusty little Dublin bookstore when a formidable shadow fell over the book. Startled, he looked up. There was his mother, clutching her chest.

H'mm, h'mm, Dr. Jefferies said to himself after he had completed his examination, this is getting out of hand. He had a few stern words for the obviously worried son at the front door as he was leaving.

"Don't look so forlorn, my boy. You are taking these minor incidents much too seriously. I hope you aren't thinking of missing another year of college because of what happened to your mother. Again, I can't emphasize too strongly that blood pressure fluctuations are not indications of anything serious. Don't miss going to college. You have to get out into the real world, mingle with your peers, face life as it is."

"I don't know, doctor," he mumbled. "I wouldn't want to be away should something deleterious happen to Mother."

At which the good doctor could



only shake his head while thinking, the poor lad; I'm afraid he's in for a miserable life.

The poor lad didn't go to college that year, any year. There were no more "minor incidents." They were not needed. It finally dawned on the brilliant numbskull that his mother did not want him to leave her. Also, he himself—haunted by the humiliating memories of St. Mark's and Hillsdale High—was afraid that Dr. Jefferies' real world would be even worse.

So he remained firmly welded to his mother's steel-hardened apron strings, a poor, pathetic, pusillanimous pipsqueak—a shrinking violet "doomed to waste its sweetness on the desert air." So it seemed.

The years passed. His mother's investments grew more valuable; his book collection grew, along with it tons of worthless information (the longest word in Shakespeare is "honorificabilitudinitatibus" . . . and on and on and on).

Slowly he began to realize that he was wasting his life, that he might as well have been in a monastery, or in prison. And whose fault was it? It was Mother's fault, that's whose. Thus, little by little, the spineless genius began to harbor a subconscious bitterness toward his mother (Freud—he and the subconscious were old buddies—would have predicted this by Chapter Three). He began having nightmares in which he pummeled his mother unmercifully with a quart of milk.

But a downtrodden weakling—no guts—he kept his bitterness tightly bottled up, made no effort to

assert himself, go off on his own, search for a niche.

Dr. Jefferies, long gone, hadn't actually expected Eleanor Callighan to live well into her nineties—few of his patients did—but he would have been somewhat surprised that she had fallen so short of the mark. Eleanor O'Brien Callighan died in her sleep in April 1987 at the age of sixty-seven, the coroner's report listing the cause of death as "pulmonary embolism." No, it wasn't. She died of a heart that had broken three separate times, had never healed.

Her only heir, her grief-stricken son, inherited nearly thirty million dollars after the huge tax bite, she having nurtured her original inheritance with the same single-minded intensity she had lavished on her son; the result, a brilliant success, a dismal failure.

Time passes, seasons come and go, the moving finger writes; things have changed since the July day in 1987 when the pusillanimous polymath, dragooned by desperate Annie Barnes, crept into the library cowering and cringing, with about as much self-esteem as a hapless worm on the end of a fisherman's hook. Both the library and the encyclopedic bookworm have undergone complete transformations.

First, the library: it has a new roof, the latest in computer systems, a powerful new air-conditioning/heating unit, a lovely new carpet—the place looks elegant. In addition there is an enlarged lunch-



room complete with two new micro-waves, a new refrigerator, two mammoth coffee percolators. That's not all. Joe Kaminsky has a new riding mower and snow blower (the long walk from the parking lot to the library had worn out a half-dozen snow shovels, a dozen brooms, and had come close to wearing out Joe's back). With time on his hands, Joe has finally mastered the Dewey system, no longer has someone looking over his shoulder to be sure he knows what he's doing.

The expenditures at the library came to three hundred eighty-five thousand dollars, willingly paid by Joseph Patrick, the budding philanthropist (his mother—who'd spent hours at the library researching potential investments—had donated five thousand dollars yearly with the stipulation that it go only for books).

There were other gifts: a new conveyor at the garbage dump; a splendid new children's playground; the purchase of the long-talked-about, nothing-done-about (no money) huge plot of land on the south edge of town, the plan being to make it into an industrial park, lure small businesses to the area.

Now to the former shrinking violet. He stands tall, head high, shoulders back, he looks even taller than his six feet three inches. He now weighs one fifty-eight, is yet sinewy, but is a lot more thewy than the skin-and-bones weakling of so many miserable years. Some of the credit goes to the man-sized meals prepared by Mrs. Patterson (in her late seventies, hanging tough), but most of the credit for the

extraordinary appearance, the amazing metamorphosis, must go to the three pound brain with its mammoth storehouse of encyclopedism.

For Joseph Patrick Callighan III, once a pipsqueakish genius, has found his niche, something at which he excels, which has brought self-esteem, confidence, bliss. No wonder. Everyone with whom he comes in contact at the library praises him unstintingly. He is respected, admired, held in awe.

He dwells in nirvana. "Why don't I find Nirvana in my atlas?" was one of the early phone questions he answered, his voice squeaky, barely audible. Now he answers in a strong, manly voice ("Noah's Ark; how long? It was three hundred by fifty by thirty cubits. A cubit is eighteen inches. Yes, quite crowded.") and eagerly awaits the next patron who is having trouble locating books on a particular subject ("Medicine in Colonial times? Yes, we have many books on the shelves. Come with me."). And . . . the once shy, timid, mother's boy is in love.

But it had been nip and tuck, touch and go, for the two week trial period. Annie was a nervous wreck, but when he sheepishly came to her just before closing time at noon on the second Saturday and mumbled that he would like to try it a little longer, she simply couldn't restrain herself.

"Oh, thank God. Joseph Patrick, I could kiss you." And she almost did, lunging at him with arms spread wide, lips at the ready, but he dodged frantically, ran to the

front door, fled unscathed.

Annie behaved herself on Monday when he came in bringing the statue of St. Jerome (Rose had given it to J. P., telling him the saint would protect his valuable books from mold and bugs). Annie knew she had won.

"Would it be all right if I put St. Jerome on the desk, Annie?" he asked timidly.

"You can put St. Jerome, the Twelve Apostles, and Tippecanoe and Tyler, too," she said happily. It just came out spontaneously.

"Tippecanoe and Tyler, too?" he said, mystified. Then he giggled. He actually giggled. The metamorphosis had begun.

The last week of June 1989 was a sad week at the library. Two long-time volunteers threw in the towel, bowing tearfully to the insidious infirmities of *The Golden Years*: macular degeneration for Millie, Parkinson's for Thelma. There were hugs, tears, everyone vowing to stay in touch and meaning it. But—life goes on.

Edith Janson saw the notice in the *Morning News Beacon* for July third. Volunteers were needed at the library. Hours were flexible.

Well now, thought Edith—she had planned to take life easy, read a lot (mysteries and biographies), do a little backyard gardening—I can spare a few hours a week. Besides, it'll give me the opportunity of having first crack at new arrivals.

She dialed the phone number, talked to Jan Phillips, said she had seen the notice and was willing to volunteer a few hours weekly, pref-

erably Monday afternoon. Jan said that was fine, asked her name, address, and phone number.

"Then we'll see you at twelve thirty, Mrs. Janson," said Jan.

"One o'clock would be more suitable for me," Edith said in a crisp, authoritative voice. To which Jan replied, "Good."

Came Monday, July nineteenth, a hot, sultry day. Edith—who would have considered herself only half dressed without a big hat—pondered which one of her two dozen she should wear. After all, she told herself, I want to make a good impression. She made quite an impression. Tall, robust, excellent stature, and wearing a broad-brimmed white summer hat with a little blue bow, she reached the library at one, strode up to the front counter with a purposeful look about her.

Annie Barnes, who was holding down the front counter, looked up, saw the formidable personage, very nearly gasped out loud. It was the hat that made the first impression, exactly the kind of hat that Eleanor Callaghan wore in her summer visits to the library.

Edith introduced herself. "Mrs. Edith Janson. I talked to someone last week about volunteering on Monday afternoons," she said.

"Oh yes," Annie managed, "we've been expecting you. I'm Annie Barnes, head of this nice little library. And we certainly appreciate your volunteering. We're quite short at the moment."

That was enough chitchat for Edith. She suggested that Annie show her around, explain what her duties would be.



"I have a pretty good idea what I'll be doing," she said. "I've spent a lot of pleasant hours in libraries."

"I'm sure you have," said Annie. Excusing herself, she hurried into the back room, where two volunteers were sorting a huge pile of returns preparatory to sending them to the stacks. She asked one of them—Bertha—to take over the front desk while she showed the new volunteer around.

It didn't take Annie long to introduce Edith to everyone, almost. Finally she couldn't stall any longer—the only person Edith hadn't met was the fine looking man at the reference desk. There was a temporary lull in the need for his services, and he was taking a refresher course in Vol. 8 (Fos-Gra) of the encyclopedia, had just finished the fascinating article on "The Sturm und Drang Movement in German Literature" as Annie and Edith came up.

"This is Joseph Patrick Callighan III," said Annie in miserable sotto voice. "He's our crackerjack reference expert. We're very proud of him."

Sotto voice notwithstanding, Joseph Patrick had heard Annie, and, blushing noticeably as he did when someone praised him, he turned toward them, began to get up, saw Edith, paled noticeably, sank back, unable to say a word.

Poor Annie—her worse fears realized—almost shoved Edith down the two short steps to the periodical reading room, babbled some idiotic thing about this was where the magazines and newspapers were kept as any idiot could have

readily seen. No idiot, Edith wasn't paying attention. She kept looking back over her formidable shoulder at the reference desk. Finally it got the better of her.

"Is there something physically wrong with . . . what did you say his name was?"

"Joseph Patrick Callighan III," said Annie, biting her tongue to keep from blurting out, "Why the hell did you have to wear that hat?"

"My, that's quite a mouthful. What I meant was, he suddenly turned pale and seemed unable to stand up after you introduced me. Didn't you notice?"

Annie had noticed, her heart sinking.

"The truth is, Mrs. Janson, you bear something of a resemblance to his dead mother. They were very close."

"Oh. I almost don't know what to say. I think I'll go back and talk to him for a moment or two. Put him at ease."

"No, no, no, don't do that. He's an extremely sensitive person and . . . well, he's just had a shock. It's best to let it rest for now."

"If you say so," said Edith, plainly indicating that she didn't agree.

Nirvana had hit a pothole. Joseph Patrick made it through the rest of that dreadful afternoon, but that night his mother came back. She wore one of her large white summer hats. She was disappointed in him. Of course she believed in charity but not in the rash manner with which he was depleting his inheritance.



Even worse—she cringed in embarrassment—was his behavior at the library, grinning and giggling idiotically every time a staff member or a patron gushed over him (“Oh, Mr. Callighan, you’re a genius, a genuine genius.”) for having done some simple thing that reference people are supposed to do.

She wasn’t finished. It distressed her to see the way he was making a fool of himself over Joyce Madison. Yes, she loved books just like he did, but did he know that she was a good fifteen years older than he (not so, it was only nine), and was he aware that she had her gray hair touched up at Lillian’s New York Style Salon every three weeks?

That did it. Demeaning a dear, sweet, shy girl like Joyce was outrageous. After two years of wonderful bibliophile propinquity to Joyce he had just about gotten up the courage to ask if she would like to see his rare books. Deliriously happy only the day before, his nights filled with dreams of dear Joyce, he felt the old wounds being reopened. He jumped out of bed, paced the floor for hours, finally fell back into bed as a bleak dawn broke.

Now, night after night, his mother was back. He begged her to stop, to allow him to enjoy his new life. No good. She had worked too hard to acquire the fortune she had left him to allow a sly, scheming femme fatale to get her greedy hands on it. (Joyce Madison, a femme fatale? Was the pope a Protestant?)

She was driving him crazy. He was getting no more than two or three hours of sleep at night. To

stay awake at the library he turned to drink: coffee. He had never been allowed more than a single cup a day. (“After all, dear, more than one isn’t good for you,” *she* had told him.) Now he was drinking six, seven, sometimes eight (the eight on Monday, Edith Janson’s day at the library).

Of course the staff—especially Annie and Joyce—became very concerned, for it was woefully obvious that the caffeine was making him nervous, jumpy, miserable. Annie came very close to taking him aside, giving him a stern lecture, telling him that he was a grown man and should act like one. Yes, Edith Janson resembled his mother but she wasn’t his mother; his mother was dead, no longer had any control over him. Excellent advice, but she was afraid that if she gave it it might make the situation worse. Maybe it’ll all work out, she told herself. It didn’t.

The afternoon of Monday, August seventh, 1989, was a typical hot summer day outside, delightfully cool in the library, the powerful air-conditioning system working perfectly. Edith Janson arrived promptly at one, hatless (she had been leaving her hat in the car, since no one wore a hat while working). She sought out Annie to find out what she would be doing. Annie said that there were three carts of books between stacks two and three, ready to be put back on the shelves.

Off went Edith, striding purposefully, on came Joseph Patrick, head down, wreathed in gloom, car-



rying a mug of hot coffee. They would have collided by aisle one if Edith—a hefty one hundred and eighty-two but quick on her feet—hadn't nimbly jumped aside. In doing so, she bumped an elbow on the edge of the stack, let loose an unladylike expletive.

"Dammit, Mr. Callighan, why don't you watch where you're going? And why are you drinking so much coffee? Can't you see it's making a nervous wreck of you? You should drink milk instead."

That advice didn't help the situation. With a choked, dismal sound he staggered toward his desk, spilling coffee on his white shirt, his brown slacks.

That was enough for Edith. I've had it, she told herself. I'm leaving, right now, immediately. Obviously I'm a disturbing influence on that man. She didn't leave. Right in front of her were the three carts filled with books, and never one to shirk a responsibility, she uttered another expletive, attacked the carts with tight lips, strong arms.

Sister Catherine, the little nun in tow, reached the library about one twenty-five, give or take a minute or two.

"Come on, dear," the good Samaritan said, "I'll find a seat for you in the periodical room, and you stay there while I check out a book. Then we'll go for a nice ride in the mountains."

Which meant nothing to poor Sister Mary Bridget, who, deep in the third stage of Alzheimer's disease, merely stared at Sister Catherine with the blank expression

characteristic of the disease. You poor, poor dear, Sister Catherine thought as she steered her toward the periodical room. When they passed near the reference desk—it was situated against the west wall, slightly above the periodical room—Sister Catherine noticed that Joseph Patrick had his head down, turned toward the wall as if hiding from something. Now what does that mean? she thought.

She helped Sister Mary Bridget down the two steps into the periodical room, gently seated her in a comfortable chair, then impulsively (Now why did I do that? she asked herself almost immediately afterwards.) she pointed to the reference desk, said: "See that man there at the desk, Sister; that's Joseph Patrick Callighan III. You taught him in second and third grade at St. Mark's." Sister Mary Bridget looked, but her expression didn't change.

"Now you stay right here, Sister," went on Sister Catherine. "I'll only be a minute."

Hurrying to the front desk to check out *Another Bungled Case*, Sister Catherine had an uneasy feeling that it had been a mistake to bring Sister Mary Bridget to the library, but she wasn't sure why she felt this way. It was her subconscious, Freud's old pal for nagging. Sister Catherine had temporarily forgotten the long ago incident when Sister Mary Bridget, already sinking into the dark pit of Alzheimer's, burst into history class, quart of milk held high, shouting, "Callighan child, your milk is here."



Sister Catherine was a highly intelligent, sixty-six-year-old woman in great physical shape, her memory as sharp as it had been in her youth, yet she hadn't remembered the incident; otherwise she would have never pointed Joseph Patrick out to Sister Mary Bridget.

Even so, who would have predicted that poor little lost Sister Mary Bridget, who wouldn't have known her name or where she was, would suddenly remember something that had happened nearly thirty years ago just by hearing a name from the past? (This phenomenon, long range memory, has given researchers hope that Alzheimer's will be eradicated some day, just as polio was.) But remarkable as it was, it would have passed harmlessly were it not for two incidents that occurred within a few precious minutes of one another.

There was a delay at the check-out counter. A four-year-old blonde darling had an armful of books which she kept dropping, one after the other.

"She's becoming a full-fledged bibliomaniac," said her mother proudly as she stooped down, picked up another book. Sister Catherine, becoming very uneasy for some reason, kept looking toward the periodical room, where she could just see the top of Sister Mary Bridget's wimpled head.

Marge shrugged helplessly at Sister Catherine, bore up patiently. Finally all the books were recorded, and mother and daughter departed, chatting happily. Marge took *Another Bungled Case* from the re-

served-book cart, recorded it, told Sister Catherine she hoped she would enjoy it.

The total time Sister Catherine spent at checkout couldn't have been more than three minutes, an inconsequential period in a lifetime, monumental that day. If (another *if*) the greedy little blonde bibliomaniac had taken only four books instead of twelve, Sister Catherine and Sister Mary Bridget would have been on their way out of the library, a tragedy averted. Unfortunately, it was not to be. And it wouldn't have been if (such a little word *if* packs a lot of power) Edith Janson weren't such a conscientious person in whatever she did. She emptied the three carts in record time, took them back to the sorting room, was about to leave without saying goodbye to anyone ("I'll phone Mrs. Barnes later when I calm down.") when she spied a *National Geographic* on the bottom shelf of one of the carts. Magazines were not to be taken from the periodical room. This one had been. Someone had to take it back. Considering her agitated state Edith could have been excused for saying, "The hell with it. Let someone else take it back." Alas, that wasn't her way.

She grabbed the offending magazine, stormed by Reference not looking at the crushed person at the desk, returned the magazine to its proper slot, turned to leave, saw the little black-garbed nun, was quite surprised and then even more surprised, for she thought the nun was murmuring something. She leaned down.



"Is there something you want, Sister?" she asked solicitously, one more good intention gone awry for Sister Mary Bridget, entertaining herself with a little singsong ditty in a weak, lifeless voice:

"Joseph Patrick Callighan, your milk is here . . . Joseph Patrick Callighan, your milk is here . . . Joseph Patrick Callighan, your milk is here." She was on the last line, fading fast, when Edith Janson leaned down just as Sister Mary Bridget—bang—stopped, fell asleep, began to snore, ten seconds too late.

Now that's odd, thought Edith. She pondered it for a few moments. Then, squaring her formidable shoulders, she took three decisive steps, stopped in front of the reference desk, and looked distraught Joseph Patrick right in the eye, uttered the fatal words: "I don't know whether this means anything to you, but that little nun said . . . at least I think she said . . . that your milk is here. Were you anticipating—OH MY GOD," she gasped while simultaneously falling on her ample hindquarters as St. Jerome whizzed by, propelled by a primeval scream. It hit poor little snoring Sister Mary Bridget right on her wimpled forehead in mid-snore, sending her falling from the chair, dying painlessly in her sleep, the dear soul.

Attorney Henry Beeson, in his seventies but still in charge, was initially quite grumpy at being interrupted during his nap, but he quickly changed as he listened to Annie's hasty account of what she

knew of the tragedy. Then he—with the newest partner, Walter Michaels, at the wheel—hurried to the hospital. Henry filling Walter in on the way.

The doctor in charge was against their seeing the patient, but he did agree to ask if the patient would see them. He came back to say that the patient insisted on seeing them.

"He only regained consciousness fifteen minutes ago and is still dazed, so please don't excite him."

They were shown into Room 147 by a nurse who let them know that she was against it.

"I'm against your seeing him. He's in no condition to talk to anyone. But I'm just a nurse."

She left.

Michaels pulled two chairs up to the side of the bed, Henry opening proceedings by asking the patient how he felt, hardly a brilliant beginning, for the patient—propped up in bed, white as a sheet—couldn't have looked much worse.

"Awful, terrible," he moaned, "What came over me? I must have gone temporarily insane to have thrown St. Jerome at Mother and Sister Felicity. I wanted to hit them both, all at once. I . . . I . . . can't believe it. Yes, I had strong feelings about each of them—they ruined my life—but I wouldn't deliberately hurt them. I abhor violence. In all my life I have never stepped on an ant or a beetle or any little creeping thing. It's not their fault they are what they are, is it?"

"No, it isn't," said Henry soberly as Michaels leaned over, whispered, "Sister Felicity? His mother? Didn't Mrs. Barnes tell you the nun's

name was Sister Mary Bridget? And wasn't the other person a volunteer?"

"Shh," shushed Henry. In a soft voice he addressed the distraught patient. "I think it best that we postpone our little talk until tomorrow, Joseph Patrick. That will give you time . . ."

"No, no, no," he interrupted, "I don't want to wait. I must know if—if Sister Felicity is badly hurt. I saw St. Jerome hit her in the forehead, then everything went black. She's not . . . you know . . . is . . . is she?"

She was, long ago, done in by a frightened mouse. And now dear Sister Mary Bridget was also, you know.

Oh boy, thought Henry, here we go.

"The nun is dead, but—now, now, lie back, go on, we'll have to leave immediately unless you calm down. That's better. Ah, as I said the nun is dead, but she didn't suffer one second. She was asleep when the . . . the object hit her. But . . . but . . . it wasn't Sister Felicity, . . . it . . . it . . . was Sister Mary Bridget."

The patient jerked up in bed, threw off the sheet, began waving his arms, shouting, "No, no it couldn't have been. It was mean, nasty Sister Felicity. She was all in black just like she was all those years she tormented me at St. Mark's. She hated me. I would never, never hurt dear Sister Mary Bridget. That horrible milk thing was not her fault. It was Mother's and Sister Felicity's. It was—"

He was really screaming. Henry pointed to the buzzer; Michaels

jumped up, kept his finger on it until the nurse rushed in. She took one look.

"Beat it," she thundered. They beat it. They went down to the lounge, remained there for nearly an hour while Henry resumed his nap and Michaels came up with a half dozen sure-fire defenses, including caffeine frenzy, Annie's having emphasized the excessive coffee consumption.

The doctor finally came to the lounge, not happy.

"I've given him a mild sedative. Though he's more composed, I'm not in favor of having him interviewed, but he insists he wants to see you, wants to confess, pay whatever penalty is imposed. Again, take it easy."

Michaels said they would, then he shook one of Henry's arms, woke him.

"We can see him now, sir. The doctor says he wants to confess. We don't want him to do that, do we?"

"We'll do whatever has to be done," said Henry, still half asleep.

They didn't have much to do. Walter Michaels didn't get to use any of his sure-fire defenses, nor did Annie Barnes, Sister Catherine, or Edith Janson have to go to the police, shamefully confess that they had withheld vital information, for by the time Detective Mike Kiegel and Sergeant Vince Markowsky made it to the hospital the die was cast.

Nothing his attorneys said ("Don't do something you'll regret. Wait until tomorrow when you've calmed down. Wait, man, wait.") had an effect. He had committed a



horrible crime. He must pay the penalty.

Thus, in a choked, halting voice he confessed to the two gloomy detectives that he had thrown the statue of St. Jerome with murderous intent. He signed the confession; his two gloomy attorneys signed as witnesses.

Three days later—having steadfastly resisted all the fervent pleas of Henry Beeson to wait, to have a jury trial (“I have already made an awful spectacle of myself,” he said, time after time. “I couldn’t stand the publicity of a jury trial.”)—he, with a crestfallen Beeson at his side, appeared before the venerable Judge Justin Youngwood to confess that he had thrown the statue of St. Jerome with murderous intent.

His Honor, in dismal voice, melancholy mien, imposed the minimum sentence under the law: eight years in the minimum security prison in Central Pennsylvania. With good behavior, His Honor emphasized as cheerfully as possible—which wasn’t very cheerful—he could be out in four years.

“Would His Honor grant the convicted person a month to allow him to put his affairs in order?” Attorney Beeson asked. His Honor would; no hesitation.

To Joseph Patrick Callighan III—convicted of murder, reviled, disgraced, scorned (in his own mind)—putting his affairs in order meant giving away his fortune, serving his punishment, vanishing. Which was wrong, all wrong, Attorney Beeson kept telling him.

“You can’t give it all away,” he insisted. “You’ll be back in a few

years, back at the library, will be welcomed with open arms. You’ll need money to live on, to maintain the house.”

No use. He had disgraced everyone—Annie Barnes, Joyce Madison, the whole town.

“I shall never show my face in Hillsdale ever again,” he said in a choked voice. And he didn’t.

“I hope to join a monastery when my term is up. That’s if there’s one that will accept me.”

Henry Beeson gave up. He prepared one document after another, took them to the mansion, where Joseph Patrick had secluded himself, refusing to see anyone or answer the phone, leaving broken-hearted Mrs. Patterson to ward off everyone but Beeson.

Day by day his inheritance disappeared (he manfully ignored his mother’s frantic pleas). The library was given one million dollars, the principal to remain intact, the interest to pay the salary of a reference desk expert, any money left over to go for books. Annie Barnes was given fifty thousand dollars (she cried for two days, couldn’t stop) as a personal gift, not a cent to be spent on the library. Both Jan Phillips and Joe Kaminsky were given twenty thousand. Fifty thousand went to a volunteers fund, Annie to dispense it, and one hundred thousand to Father Ruskowski for St. Mark’s.

Faithful housekeeper Mrs. Patterson got fifty thousand (she cried for a week, couldn’t stop). The various maids were given five thousand each. That left dear Joyce Madison, the girl of his dreams. She

was deeded the mansion with its valuable library, an additional fifty thousand, and a timid suggestion that maybe, with the library as a drawing card, she might make it into a bed and breakfast (poor Joyce; she cried for two weeks, couldn't stop).

Twenty-eight million of the inheritance remained. Bowing to Henry Beeson's last impassioned plea, Joseph Patrick put a quarter of a million aside. The remainder of his fortune became the Ashford County Development Foundation, to be used to bring companies to the industrial park being created on the land he had bought for the city the year before.

His affairs in order, thirty-seven-year-old Joseph Patrick Callighan III was driven to Scherville State Prison, became inmate number eight fifty-nine. Words cannot describe the poor man's feelings as the prison gates closed behind him. Some feelings are indescribable.

The committee formed by Henry Beeson—he had agreed to be chairman—to promote the foundation went to work. Other members were the mayor, the county commissioner, the president of the Second National Bank, the publisher of the *Morning Beacon News*. Someone had to be hired to do the hard work.

They got a break. A former management consultant based in Pittsburgh, tired of the constant traveling, had taken early retirement and built a fine home in the mountains but found out that doing nothing wasn't so great. Approached by Henry Beeson—his firm had handled the paperwork on the moun-

tain property—and asked if he would be interested in running the foundation, the retiree leaped at the opportunity.

He rented space, hired three eager people, contacted the Appalachian Regional Development Commission, a federal agency formed in 1965 to improve conditions in chronically depressed Appalachia. Would the commission provide matching funds? It would, since it was acutely aware that Ashford County and one hundred forty-seven of the four hundred six counties of the thirteen states that compose Appalachia, were still stuck in "seemingly hopeless poverty," employment a dismal eighteen percent.

In early December that year the elderly abbot of the Good Samaritan Monastery in Kentucky, rose from his arthritic knees—barely wincing—having completed his novena. Once again the good monks had given away far too much of their revenue (their famous Chardonnay wine financed their good works) to the needy in that part of poverty-stricken Appalachia. The cupboard was bare, but the abbot was confident that the Lord would again come through. He did.

Two days before Christmas a letter arrived from one Joseph Patrick Callighan III, an inmate of a Pennsylvania prison, imprisoned for having murdered a nun (oh my, the abbot thought). Holding nothing back, the prisoner told the whole story, making no excuses. He went on to say that he had inherited a large sum of money, had given away all but two hundred fifty



thousand. He hoped to be released in four years, hoped to become a monk. Would the abbot have any compunctions about accepting an ex-convict and a donation of that sum?

The abbot answered immediately. Compunctions? None. As long as the writer had repented of his sin and would abide by the monastic rules of celibacy, poverty, and obedience, he and his donation would be welcome. A cashier's check arrived by return mail.

January twenty-fifth, 1999. Good News:

There were smiles all around as the Ashford County Development Foundation met for the yearly report. Three more companies had been lured to the industrial park. That made a total of fourteen—mostly small, but growing—the result of an aggressive advertising campaign that stressed the area's natural beauty, its nearness to a major airport (Pittsburgh), to two interstate highways, but the telling points were the eighteen percent unemployment figures and the promise of "financial assistance."

Over eleven hundred formerly unemployed individuals, both men and women (the start-up electronics company formed by two Penn State grads employed most of the women) were now drawing a paycheck, and as many of them kept reminding themselves, it was all due to Joseph Patrick Callighan III. He had wrought a miracle.

June twenty-second, 1999. Bad News:

Father Ruskowski, having said

his nightly prayers, was about to hit the hay when the phone rang. The abbot of the Good Samaritan Monastery in Kentucky was calling. He had bad news. Brother Joseph Patrick had listed Father Ruskowski as the person to contact in case "something unexpected happened." Something unexpected *had* happened. Brother Joseph Patrick had gone to his eternal reward.

"Oh my goodness," said Father Ruskowski. "I'm so sorry. But what happened? He was still a young man."

It took the abbot—doleful and hesitant—about ten minutes to tell the whole story, sounding as if he almost didn't believe what had happened. To summarize: horseshoe pitching was one of the few recreations the monks were allowed. Several of the monks became experts, no one more so than Brother Silvester who had once thrown thirty-seven ringers in a row. He became unbeatable; none of the other monks would oppose him any longer.

Undaunted, Brother Silvester—seemingly already handicapped by being a southpaw, taunted the other monks by saying he would pitch blindfolded, which he did, still won over half the matches. On the afternoon in question, Brother Silvester and Brother David were engaged in a spirited contest with Brother Silvester ahead fifteen to thirteen. Brother Joseph Patrick, on his way to the vineyard to see if his scarecrows were doing their job (crows had taken to feasting on the grapes), happened to be walking by just as a bloodthirsty wasp landed



on Brother Silvester's left ear as he was on the downward swing, about to send his horseshoe toward the peg. Brother Silvester let out a loud yelp, flung the horseshoe off to the left, swatted the wasp furiously. Unfortunately the shoe hit Brother Joseph Patrick right in the middle of his forehead. He staggered a few steps, collapsed, dying almost before he hit the ground.

"It's a strange world, Father," the abbot went on. "If Brother Silvester had been right-handed instead of left-handed, nothing untoward would have happened. The horseshoe would have been flung to the right, no harm done."

Father Ruskowski, shaking his head over the whole goofy setup, was almost tempted to say that was true but if Brother Silvester hadn't been allowed to pitch blindfolded, an accident in the making, Brother Joseph Patrick might still be alive. But why say anything?

"We buried dear Brother Joseph Patrick in our cemetery overlooking the vineyards, Father," the abbot concluded, his tone now close to the sepulchral, "He was a saintly man, a devoted follower of the Lord. We shall miss him."

Father Ruskowski, his eyes misting, his voice faltering, mumbled that he was indeed a saintly man. That was about it. They hung up. Father Ruskowski sat for about fifteen minutes thinking; poor Joseph Patrick, yes, he was a good man but he didn't have much fun in life. How sad. Then, glancing at the clock, seeing it was not yet ten, he phoned the *Morning News Beacon*, told the story to the night editor, an

oldtimer ending his days in the sticks:

"Do you think you could leave out the blindfolded part," asked Father Ruskowski, "and the wasp? Dying from a horseshoe to the temple is, well, strange enough without the other . . . things."

The editor said that he would leave out the wasp and the blindfold.

"Tongues will wag enough as it is—the town's revered benefactor gone to his eternal reward due to a wayward horseshoe. But Father, between you and me—I thought I'd heard everything, but this takes the cake."

Father Ruskowski agreed, but after hanging up he felt something nagging at him. Had he missed something important in the abbot's report? He couldn't think of anything.

Tongues did wag, the phone lines hummed, the entire industrial park declared ten minutes of silence, and as the days went by, that odd feeling that had been nagging at Father Ruskowski disappeared. It returned with a bang on August eighth, resurrected by the item in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*: Pope John Paul II had added another twelve saints to the Church's roll of saints and, as usual, not a single American. With the new saints the pope had canonized two hundred thirty-six holy people, exactly one half of the five hundred ninety-two saints who have been canonized in the last five hundred years.

"That's it, that's it!" exclaimed Father Ruskowski. "Now I know what was nagging at me. It was the ab-



bot calling Joseph Patrick 'saintly, a devoted follower of the Lord.' And he was. Wow, wouldn't it be . . . whoops . . . hold on, hold on, take it easy, don't get all het up about something that's about as daunting as anything can be. Sainthood is no simple matter."

But the more he thought about it, the more excited he became. Not only was the American Church being short-changed (only four Americans had been canonized and only one, Mother Seton, was native-born) but in Joseph Patrick Callighan III the Church had a perfect candidate. Yes, the criteria were severe. To begin with, one had to be dead for at least five years. Well, we have a start, he thought. Then the candidate must have led a good life being kind to others, charitable, helping the less fortunate. Joseph Patrick could pass that test with flying colors.

But good works are not enough. There must be two miracles attributed to the prospective saint. Miracles brought about by Joseph Patrick's funding of the industrial park (alcoholics reformed, families restored, attendance at city churches increased—with a corresponding increase in collections—all brought about by hopeless people drawing a paycheck, going off welfare, regaining self-esteem) don't count. The miracles must be performed posthumously because of the prayers of sick people whom doctors had given up. But once Joseph Patrick was declared venerable—the last step before canonization—people could pray to him, miracles would follow. They *could*,

Father Ruskowski told himself, really excited.

He was forced to admit that in Joseph Patrick's case there was a serious problem: murdering a nun. Still, of the thousands of saints (in early days bishops could confer sainthood without having to seek higher authority) on the Church's rolls there were a lot whom you wouldn't trust with your teenage daughter or your grandmother's silver. Saint Augustine himself, revered as the Church's greatest theologian, was no saint in his early years. He drank, gambled, consorted with concubines, and lived with a mistress for fourteen years, and when she became pregnant by him, he threw her out. Yes, he repented, but compared to him, Joseph Patrick was sainthood personified.

And a postulator—a priest who presents a plea for sainthood—could argue that the accidental murder of a poor lost soul—he had been, in his caffeine frenzy and his nightmarish agony, aiming at what he thought was his mother—was an act of mercy. Wow, Father Ruskowski thought, I'm really going overboard. But why not? Joseph Patrick Callighan III was a fine, decent, kind human being who led a more saintly life than many who've been canonized.

He decided to begin a file on Joseph Patrick (it's high time, he thought, that we American Catholics—there are over sixty-two million of us—had more than one native-born saint), quietly gather evidence, start the ball rolling, well aware that he would be long gone,



his successor long gone, and perhaps his successor's successor long gone before Joseph Patrick Callighan III would become St. Joseph Patrick (Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, for instance, who became St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, died in 1821, wasn't canonized until 1975.).

While Father Ruskowski starts the ball rolling, it behooves us to wrap up. What happened to the beneficiaries of Joseph Patrick's charity? The library is operating smoothly; a reference desk expert was lured from the main Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, is doing a fine job. ("Yes, but she's no Joseph Patrick," one often hears.)

Annie Barnes spent a little of her gift on a weekend cruise to St. Thomas, met a widower from Toledo. He visits her every weekend, she looks ten years younger. Joyce Madison's bed and breakfast is a huge success, a mecca for bibliophiles and leaf peepers. She too has found romance; a bookbinder from Pittsburgh is courting her; she is responding aggressively. She looks twelve years younger.

Joe Kaminsky and his wife took a two week trip to Hawaii, had a great time. Mrs. Patterson is in an assisted living facility, hanging on. Jan Phillips established a college fund for her grandchildren.

Father Ruskowski used his bequest to buy new pews for St. Mark's, a new roof for the convent, and a recreation room for the nuns,

complete with a billiard table, a thirty-two-inch TV, exercise apparatus. Edith Janson, much subdued, works three afternoons a week at the library; she gave all her big hats to Goodwill.

Sister Catherine is still an avid cosy manor-house mystery reader, but she waits her turn when a new Heather Millway arrives. She goes to the nuns' nursing home—much enlarged due to the million dollar gift—five days a week bearing fresh-baked, easily chewed brownies, takes the dear old nuns for long rides in the mountains.

Constable Timothy Dawdling? Still in his beloved Cornwall, still surreptitiously shoveling clues at his supercilious superiors, who still regard him as a lazy oaf, which is fine with him and his adoring lady friends.

That about covers it. Poor Joseph Patrick Callighan III, someday around 2075, 2090, to be Saint Joseph Patrick of Hillsdale (imagine it—yearly pilgrimages just like Lourdes), he wasted his life. Granted, his mother (she is more to be pitied than condemned) was a bad influence, and Sister Felicity was a devil (she also is to be pitied); he could have fought back, could have taken charge of his life, gone off to college, consorted with skimpy-skirted Penn State seductresses, hoisted a few beers, had fun, in moderation. Life is too short to waste it in sainthood.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the March issue.

"They don't *look* like diamond smugglers," said Agent Randy Anstead, nodding toward the ten couples lined up to clear Customs at JFK International Airport from the Aer Lingus flight.

"Probably why they've been getting by with it for years," snorted his partner, Agent Miles Turgo.

"But," Turgo added, "one of those men turned informer for the reward, and he convinced me.

"They are all related by marriage—just one big happy family of smugglers," he went on. "Together they have devised all sorts of clever gimmicks to hide the gems."

He started down the line to collect the landing slips showing name, maiden name (if applicable), and place of birth. When he finished and returned to Agent Anstead, he confided, "As they are lined up now, Randy . . .

(1) "They are all actually *intermarried*: every man there has a sister present, and every woman has a brother in line. One couple has the last name of Gilson, one man was born in Utah, and one woman was born in South Carolina.

(2) "The man born in Virginia stands three places in front of the man who married Miss Ingalls and three places behind Paula's husband. Their last names are Anderson, Barker, and Cress (in some order). None of the three is first or last in line, nor are Mr. Ignacio or Velma's husband.

(3) "The woman born in Oklahoma is four places in front of Mrs. Dawson and two places behind James's wife. They include Mary, Nellie, and Ophelia. Neither Mrs. Dawson nor the former Miss Cress is married to Dave or to the man born in Rhode Island (who is not the husband of Quilla).

(4) "Mr. Elgin is two places in front of Arthur and three places behind the man whose wife was born in Pennsylvania. Their wives' maiden names include Anderson, Barker, and Elgin.

(5) "Mr. Cress stands three places ahead of Bart and two behind the man born in Nevada. Their wives were born in Montana, Nevada, and Oklahoma (in some order).

(6) "The former Miss Elgin is three places ahead of Quilla and immediately behind the woman whose husband was born in Texas. They are married (in some order) to Arthur, Bart, and Carl, none of whom is second or eighth in line.

(7) "The former Miss Anderson is four places ahead of Emil's wife and two places behind the woman born in Virginia. Their husbands were born in the states of Montana, Nevada, and Oklahoma. The man born in Oklahoma is neither Teresa's husband nor the man who married Miss Dawson.

(8) "Rosa is just ahead of Mrs. Ingalls and just behind Arthur's wife. Another three women include Ursula, Mrs. Barker just behind her, and the woman whose husband was born in Tennessee, who is just ahead of Ursula. None of the six married George. Ursula's husband was not born in Montana.

(9) "The woman born in Rhode Island stands two places in front of Mary and three places behind Mrs. Hanks. Another three women include the one born in Nevada, who is three places ahead of the woman married to the man born in South Carolina and three places behind Sandra.

(10) "Mrs. Fletcher stands three places ahead of the woman born in Utah and two places behind the former Miss Cress. The former Miss Cress is not Teresa.

(11) "The former Miss Fletcher is just in front of Frank and just behind Ian (who is not Mr. Jenkins).

(12) "Harry stands three places in front of the man who married Miss Jenkins and somewhere behind the man married to the woman born in Texas. Ophelia's husband is just in front of the man who married Miss Hanks and just behind the man whose wife was born in Tennessee. The former Miss Jenkins did not marry the man who was born in Pennsylvania."

Having thereby explained who everyone was to Agent Anstead, who immediately grasped the relationships among the ten couples, Agent Turgo loudly announced, "You are all under arrest!"

Suddenly one man gasped and collapsed on the floor, a knife in his back.

"Take *that*, you dirty informer!" snarled the man just behind him, breaking from the line and dashing for the exit.

Agent Anstead, wasting not a moment, tackled the fleeing smuggler and applied the handcuffs as the victim's wife moaned, "Oh my God! My own brother just stabbed my husband!"

Who was the informer? Who stabbed him?

See page 138 for the solution to the January puzzle.

.....

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FICTION

ONE CRIME TOO MANY

William T. Lowe

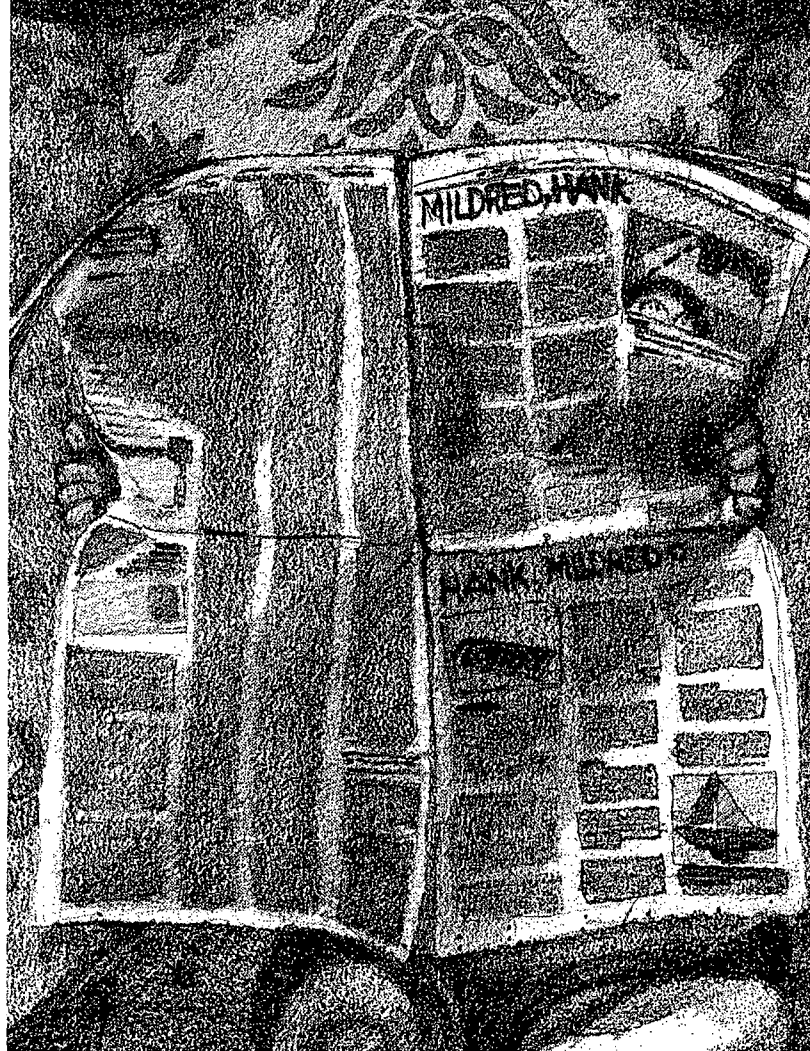


Illustration by Winifred Way

The newspaper persisted in calling it a Crime Stoppers Sweepstakes, but it was never a competition, just coincidence. The day after Mildred Sayers caught a bank robber, I nailed a car thief. Then came Mildred's lottery ticket scandal. Then I caught the man with heroin in his shoes.

But it all was a coincidence. And some pretty stupid crooks.

Mildred Sayers and I live in Fountain, a little town in the Adirondacks. We've never been friends until now. I'm Hank Sessions, deputy sheriff, retired. Mildred is a widow, teaches Sunday school, and is a teller in the branch bank in town.

For days after the first newspaper story, people would come up to the window and ask her if she had caught any more bad guys. Mildred would just smile and shake her head. It got worse after the next couple of stories.

She'd been at work as usual that morning when a man at her window handed her a note. The note was handwritten and read: "I've got a gun. Give me the cash. Stay quiet and nobody gets hurt."

Her bank has strict rules about this. Do what he wants. Stay calm. Don't start a panic. When he leaves, the manager will call the police.

Mildred stayed calm. She made a little stack of fives and tens and twenties and pushed it through the window. The man shoved it in his pocket and walked out. Then Mildred called the manager.

Of course there was some excitement. Al Forrest, the manager, closed the doors, assured the customers there was no danger, and called the police. The state police arrived first, then an FBI agent from Plattsburgh, then a news team from Channel 5.

The officers took Mildred into Al's office for questioning. "What did he look like? What did he say? Can you tell us how he was dressed?"

"I can do better than that," Mildred told them. I'm sure she had a big grin on her face. "I can give you his name and address." There was a moment of stunned silence; everybody looked at her.

Mildred had looked at the robber's note and put it in her pocket. Now she handed it carefully to the FBI agent. The note was written on the back of a business envelope addressed to a man in E'town, about forty miles away. "It may even have his fingerprints on it," Mildred added.

The agent and the troopers got on the phone and called the satellite station in Lewis, the town nearest E'town. When the bank robber got home, the troopers were waiting for him. He still had the bank's money with him.

Mildred was praised for her presence of mind. Al Forrest talked about recommending her for a raise. The paper said the robber might have been absentminded, but Mildred was a credit to the community.

The day after the troopers put the cuffs on the would-be bank robber

I nailed a man who had stolen a car. Not just any car but an expensive one that belonged to a famous recording star who had a summer home near Lake Placid.

The car had been missing for two weeks and was thought long gone, but actually it was still in the area, hidden in a body shop in Harkness. The thief had spent days repainting it a different color.

On the first day he drove the car out I happened to pull up behind him at a stop sign in Peru. Something about the car caught my eye. I followed it out of town on Route 22 towards Keeseville.

After we passed all the apple orchards, I realized what was bothering me. I called the police dispatcher on my car phone. Luckily, a unit was cruising on Route 9 south of Plattsburgh. We set up a meet in Keeseville.

The trooper and I pulled the thief over just outside of town. We checked the vehicle's I.D. number to be sure it was the celebrity's car. I was right; it was.

Repainting the car was a good move, making it easier to resell, but the man forgot to change the license plates.

The recording star insisted that I have my picture taken with her in front of her beloved car. I wasn't too happy when the photo got in the paper. Even though I'm retired, I'm working with the DEA to pin down the source of a new drug that's showing up around the colleges. Publicity doesn't help.

Two days later, the paper carried the lottery ticket story. On her own time Mildred had been documenting the fact that some retail stores in our part of the county were selling lottery tickers to minors, some as young as ten. Mildred knew that New York State law says lottery tickets cannot be sold over the counter or by vending machines to persons under eighteen.

She turned over her notes to her new friends in the state police. There was an investigation, and several merchants were facing the loss of their license.

Mildred had asked her contact to keep her name out of any reports, but somehow a newspaper reporter got hold of it. I thought the headline, "CRIME NEMESIS STRIKES AGAIN," was a little strong.

"Mildred, you're just too danged popular!" She told me her boss, Al Forrest, had started complaining. "People hanging around your window all the time, chewing the fat, asking for your autograph. Nobody goes to the other tellers. The bank ain't doing the business it should. Mildred, wouldn't you like to take your vacation early this summer?"

I was sorry to see the newspaper stick with this "Sweepstakes" angle.

I suppose the editor thought it had human interest or something. I tried to ignore it. But the next day it happened again that I was at the right place at the right time.

I was at the Greyhound bus station in Plattsburgh passing the time of day with a friend on the Border Patrol. These agents check incoming buses routinely for aliens who may have made their way across the border from Canada and are trying to get as far south as possible.

My friend was interviewing a couple of foreigners when I happened to notice one of the other passengers. Like a lot of the men he had on workclothes, but he was wearing a shiny new pair of boots. The boots didn't go with the jeans.

On my hunch we detained the man and notified the DEA. They found two pounds of heroin in the hollowed-out heels and soles of the boots and another two pounds in a carry-on bag. The man was a mule from Montreal hoping to make his way to the drug markets in Albany.

Strictly routine. Nothing could be less interesting, but a young reporter picked it up. I thought I'd talked him out of it, but my name showed up again. Some nonsense about "an eagle-eyed guardian of the public . . ." It must have been a slow news day.

Captain Mulholland of the DEA was unhappy, too. "We're glad to have you working with us on this drug case, Hank, but this kind of publicity is bad. We don't want to put these bums on their guard. Maybe you ought to take your pension and go raise a garden . . ."

LOCAL WOMAN CITES LITTLE-KNOWN SALES TAX RULING . . .

A friend asked Mildred help her decorate two veterans' graves for the Fourth of July. Mildred was happy to help. She went to a local chain store and bought two small American flags to place at the heads of the graves.

The clerk charged her sales tax for the flags. Mildred said the tax didn't apply. The clerk insisted. Mildred called the manager. He wouldn't listen, either.

Mildred was steamed. She went to the cemetery, used the flags to decorate the graves, went straight home, and picked up her phone. She knew she was right, and it wasn't the money, it was the principle.

The next day the attorney general's office in Albany sent a letter to the head office of the chain store informing the executive staff that in the state of New York sales tax is not to be collected on the American flag. The local store manager got chewed out. The store clerk told her sister all about it. Her sister told her bridge club. A member of the club called the paper.

When the story came out, Mildred wanted to call in sick, but she did-

n't. There was a crowd of well-wishers waiting at the bank, and I imagine Al Forrest complained all day long.

That was a Wednesday. At ten o'clock that Friday night, a young punk with a gun held up the new DoubleAce convenience store. Half an hour later Mildred called me and insisted I meet her in town where the robbery had taken place. She wouldn't take no for an answer. "I'll be waiting across the street. Step on it, Hank!"

There were two troopers' cars in front of the store, officers inside, a TV news team trying to get in, a small crowd behind the yellow crime-scene tape. I got in the car beside Mildred. "What's up?"

"Listen, Hank. I was in there just before the man robbed the place, and I think I know who he was."

"Hold on, Mildred," I said. "If you think you know who it was, you'd better go back there right now and tell the troopers."

She shook her head vehemently. "No way. I'm tired of being in a damn goldfish bowl around here. And I don't want to lose my job."

She put her hand on my arm. "Look, I'll tell you what I know, and you tell the troopers, all right? Just leave me out of it, that's all I ask."

I shook my head. I didn't want any more publicity either, even second-hand. "Come on, Mildred, if you know this man's name . . ."

"I don't know his name. Not exactly."

"Tell me what you've got. Then we'll decide what to do."

"All right." She shifted around nervously. "I went in to pick up some ice cream. A bunch of high school girls came in, too, and they were talking to the boy behind the counter. I saw this young man hanging around—I thought he was probably trying to sneak a *Playboy* down from the magazine rack to look at."

"Anyway, the girls leave, and I leave. I go home and turn on my scanner and hear that the store has just been robbed. The man I saw was just waiting for us to leave."

"You got a good look at him?"

She shook her head. "No, I didn't. He kept turned away."

"So the clerk got a good look . . ."

"I doubt it. Those girls were the high school cheerleading squad, going home after practice, and they had on those cute little uniforms. That clerk probably wouldn't have noticed an elephant doing a tap dance."

I was getting impatient. "So what makes you think . . ."

"Let me finish, Hank. This is a new DoubleAce store, and they're running that big contest to generate business. You know, 'Win a new boat and motor worth over a thousand dollars . . . just fill out an entry blank . . . you don't have to be present to win.' The big contest sign and the entry box are right there by the potato chips."

I didn't like where this was going. "So you think the guy filled out an entry blank?"

"I'm sure he did. Right after the girls did. I saw him walk over to the entry box."

I shook my head. "This is a hell of a longshot, Mildred."

"No, it isn't, Hank. That guy's entry is in the box on top of the blanks the girls filled out. One man's name and eight girls' names—how hard could it be to find it?" She looked at me, and her eyes were shining with excitement. "Go for it, Hank!"

I looked back down the street at the store. The troopers should be almost finished. Soon they would lock the place up, send the clerk home, probably leave one car on duty out front.

A simple holdup. But simple as it might be, right now it was just one crime too many. "No, Mildred, I pass," I said. "I've had enough of being in the paper."

I know she was disappointed. I waited a minute, and then I said, "But I've got an idea."

"I'm listening."

"This clerk tonight. What's the kid's name?"

"Freddy Baker. He's a bright young fellow. At least he didn't try to argue with somebody with a gun."

"Let's go talk to him. I want to tell him that sometimes a person can see something that doesn't register right away. You back me up."

"I get it." She gave a little laugh. "We'll tell him he saw what I saw and just doesn't remember."

"Right. He just forgot to tell the police." I paused. I didn't want her to be disappointed all over again. "It's a longshot, you know."

"I know. What are we waiting for?"

It worked. The next day somebody, and I'm sure I know who, gave the story to the paper:

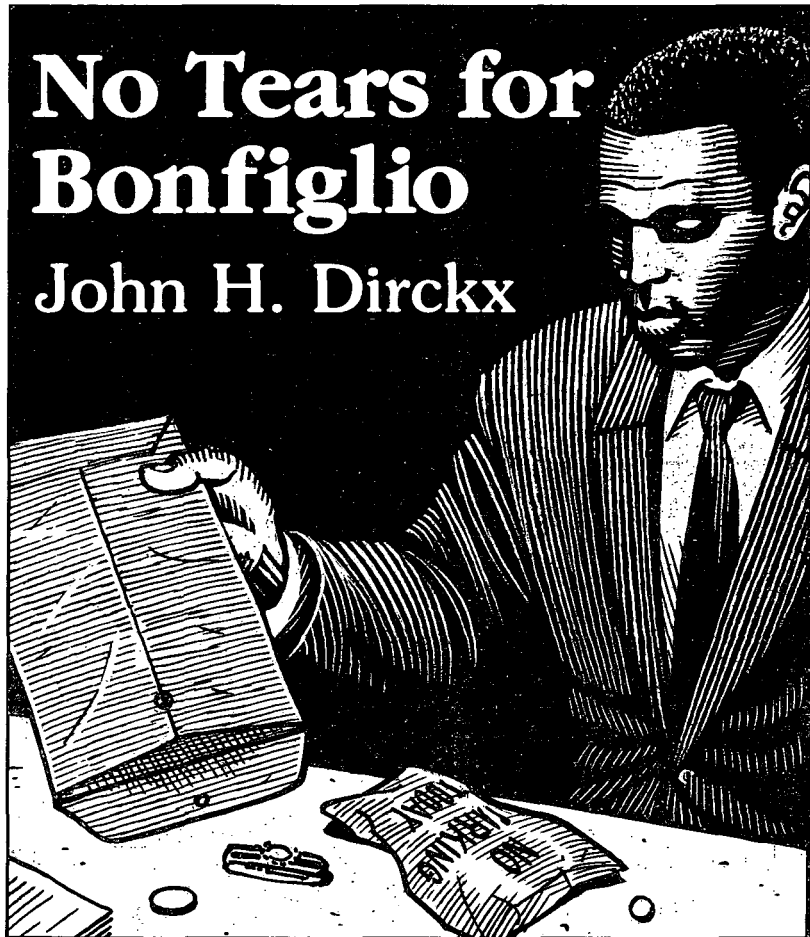
SHARP-EYED CLERK CATCHES CROOK'S SLIP

Thanks to the alertness of store clerk
Freddy Baker, police recovered the loot
from a robbery at the new DoubleAce con-
venience store last evening. Mr. Baker
was on duty behind the counter . . .

Freddy treated Mildred and me to ice cream sodas, but our real reward was not to be in the papers any more.

No Tears for Bonfiglio

John H. Dirckx



The phone in the office was ringing when, a minute or two before nine A.M., Marjorie Styles got off the elevator at the third floor. It went on ringing while she unlocked and opened the door, crossed the waiting room, and went to her desk.

"Good morning. Ogenrick & Ogenrick Law Offices."

"Let me talk to Tibor Ogenrick," said a male voice, gritty with impatience and hostility.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ogenrick won't be in today until around eleven. Can I give him a message?"

"You surely can. You can tell him Tom Downey called to find out why he stood up a whole roomful of insurance underwriters from all around the state last night. And he better have a good story."

"I know Mr. Ogenrick was planning to be at the Drones Club meeting last night, Mr. Downey. You say he didn't show up?"

"You catch on quick. He didn't even have the decency to call and cancel. I should have known better than to count on that liquor-swilling shyster."

She let her gaze rest briefly on the small enameled plaque next to her telephone that read SMILE SWEETLY AND PRESS ON. "I'll try to get in touch with Mr. Ogenrick immediately. Where can he reach you?"

"Downey Insurance. I'm in the book."

Mrs. Styles had left the door to the corridor open. From her desk she could see both the elevator and the door to the stairway. As she was about to dial Tibor Ogenrick's private number, a man in gray coveralls burst into the corridor from the stairway, caught sight of her, and charged into the office, waving a clipboard like a red flag.

"Hey, ma'am, use your phone? There's a dead body down there."

In two minutes Marjorie Styles had ascertained that the body lying cold and stiff on the stairs just above the second floor landing was that of her late employer. In another ten, a police officer had the stairway cordoned off with yellow tape. The officer took a statement from the soft-drink delivery man who had found the body and let him resume his morning rounds.

In less than half an hour an investigator from the coroner's office was on the scene taking pictures. By that time, Mrs. Styles had called Tibor Ogenrick's nephew Kevin to advise him of the death and had canceled all the dead man's appointments for the rest of the week. The investigator, Nick Stamaty,

conferred briefly with Mrs. Styles and then used her phone to call in an order for the removal of the body to the coroner's morgue.

About twenty-four hours later, in response to an urgent summons from Stamaty, Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn walked across the street from Public Safety Headquarters to the courthouse.

Stamaty's office was equipped with an espresso machine and plastered with pictures of his children, all of whom shared his dark, quiet charm. Auburn accepted a cup of something as hot and thick as molten lava.

"According to the paper," said Auburn, "Ogenrick fell on the stairs of the Garner Building. Think somebody helped him fall?"

"The coroner decided to go the whole nine yards on this one," said Stamaty. "Ogenrick had no known medical problems, and he was only fifty-three. At first glance it looked like an accidental fall, but the incident was unwitnessed."

"And everybody hated his guts."

"That's not spelled out in the county statutes, but yes, the fact that he had lots of enemies puts a certain slant on the case. He sure wasn't on my Christmas list."

"He gave me some rough times, too. You remember the Wapelhorst trial? If I hadn't been under oath, with a court reporter watching every twitch of my lips, I would have told that—oh well, he's dead now. You said 'at first glance.' I gather at second glance it looks more like homicide."

"Very much more. The immedi-

ate cause of death was a skull fracture and severe intracranial bleeding, but the toxicology screen turned up something pretty weird. Do you know what 'roachies' are?"

"Pills. Flu something."

"Flunitrazepam."

"It was right on the tip of my tongue. It's an illegal downer. Goes great with heroin and cocaine. Afterwards you don't remember a thing. Even if you're still alive. Don't tell me the counselor was on roachies."

"Them and booze. His blood alcohol wasn't high enough to get him arrested for DWI, but he had enough flunitrazepam on board to slow down an elephant."

"You think somebody slipped him a mickey?"

"Could be. Unlike the proverbial Mickey Finn, flunitrazepam has hardly any taste. He probably got it in a mixed drink. Trouble is, the trail's getting cold. He was last seen around five thirty Friday afternoon, when his secretary knocked off for the weekend. He didn't turn up for a dinner meeting at seven Sunday evening. Going by body temperature and rigor mortis, that was about the time he died."

"Any candidates?"

"Hey, Cy, I'm not a cop any more, remember?" Stamaty handed him four sheets of paper and two large glossy photographs. "This is what we've got so far. Those copies are for you to keep. I've got more pictures, but those two tell the whole story."

One photo showed Ogenrick, looking very dead, sprawled on the steel and concrete stairs of the Garner Building with his head pointing

downstream. The other, taken at the morgue, was a closeup of his head wound.

Auburn set down his demitasse to look through the notes, which included statements from the man who had found the body and from Ogenrick's secretary, as well as a preliminary autopsy report. "Next of kin, Kevin Ogenrick, nephew. Never heard of him. Pardon me for suggesting it, but isn't this a mistake? You've got Ogenrick living at his office address."

"I'll pardon you this once. It's not a mistake. His office was on the third floor of the Garner Building, and he had a bachelor apartment on the fifth floor."

"And his body was found near the second floor landing."

"It's not exactly a landing. There's a place there next to the stairwell with pay phones, benches, restrooms, a pop machine. You know the kind of thing."

Auburn turned a page. "No external marks except the head wound, which looks like it was made by the edge of a concrete step."

Stamaty slid a heavy brown envelope across the desk. Auburn opened it and gently spilled out the dead man's personal effects. "Is this everything you found on the body?"

"Everything but about thirty bucks in cash."

"Which went into your coffee kitty?"

"Bite your tongue. Also half a roll of antacid mints, which are at the lab."

The usual haul: wallet, wristwatch, folding nail clipper, dingy

cotton handkerchief, pocket comb full of lint, keys on a ring. "Where are his car keys?"

"He didn't own a car."

Auburn's eyebrows went up. He opened Ogenrick's wallet in search of a driver's license and didn't find one. Reaching into the bottom of the envelope, he pulled out a white plastic bag containing several small hard objects that clinked together. "What's this junk?"

"You're the detective, Cy."

Auburn flattened out the bag to reveal the inscription NO PARKING TODAY printed on it upside down in red. It contained a lead wheel-balancing weight, a Canadian nickel minted in 1984, a canary yellow glass marble, and a slightly damaged man's cufflink (or was it a tie tack? Auburn wasn't into personal adornment) with a flat green semi-precious stone set in a wreath of fake gold.

He laid the objects out in a row on the desk. "Looks like our deceased attorney was kind of a beachcomber—urban style."

"That's how I figured it."

"If he picked up this collection the night before last, it might give us a clue where he was when he took his last drink." Auburn touched each of the objects in turn. "Any other Canadian money on him?"

Stamaty shook his head and slid a receipt for the materials in the envelope across the desk for Auburn to sign. "Happy hunting."

"Thanks for the coffee, Nick. If it burns a hole in my insides, I'm sending you the bill."

Auburn was to remember this as

the case with innumerable dogs, two cats, and one missing rabbit that turned out to be the key to the whole thing.

He dropped off the reports and photos and most of Ogenrick's personal effects at headquarters before walking the four blocks to the Garner Building. The downtown stores were just opening. As he made his way along the thronged sidewalks, he recalled some of his own courtroom experiences with Ogenrick and reflected on the reputation and public image of this hard-drinking, headline-grabbing defender of the indefensible.

Anybody accused of defrauding widows and orphans, poisoning public well water with toxic waste, or murdering a child with an axe could count on being represented in court by Tibor Ogenrick, provided they could raise enough cash. His picture was often in the newspapers, and his eccentricities of speech and dress were legendary. His silk suits shimmered, his print ties shrieked, and his uninhibited antics in the courtroom earned him a steady stream of reprimands from the bench.

But his lack of a car was an eccentricity Auburn hadn't heard about. A preliminary review of police records hadn't turned up any evidence that Ogenrick's famous thirst for scotch had ever cost him his driver's license. Living and working in the same building was all very well, but seemingly life could get pretty complicated for a busy attorney without a car.

On arriving at the Garner Building, Auburn took the stairs from

the lobby to the second level to make a private inspection of the place where Tibor Ogenrick's body had been found. As he had foreseen, the site was as spotless as a kitchen counter. He walked up one more flight.

The firm of Ogenrick & Ogenrick occupied an office directly opposite the stairway. The stately elegance of the waiting room was marred slightly by a jack-o'-lantern, perhaps the largest Auburn had ever seen, that stood in one corner with a half-dozen candles blazing inside it. (Halloween was about a week away.)

A man and a woman sat reading magazines, each pretending the other wasn't there. In a niche opposite the door a middle-aged secretary in a dark tailored suit was deeply absorbed at a computer. She looked up as Auburn entered the lobby and divined his purpose at a glance, even before he showed identification.

"I'm Marjorie Styles. You'd better come back this way." She took him to another office where they wouldn't be overheard by the waiting clients but where she could still see the door from the corridor. "What do you need, officer?" Her manner was calm, earnest, a little reserved.

"I'd like to get some background information on Mr. Ogenrick," said Auburn.

"What kind of information?"

"For example, why he happened to be using the stairs on Sunday evening when he fell." He took out a three-by-five-inch file card, wrote her name at the top, and put it away.

"There wasn't anything strange about that. He almost always used the stairs. He was supposed to be at a dinner meeting around seven Sunday evening, over on Fifth Street. He was probably on his way there when he fell."

"I understand the last time you saw him was on Friday afternoon. Did he seem to be his usual self?"

"Yes, I'd say so."

"It's common knowledge that he drank a lot. Did he ever use drugs?"

She pulled in her chin in a mute display of surprise. "Drugs? You mean illegal drugs?"

"That for starters."

"No, definitely not. He didn't even smoke. He was kind of a health nut—the kind that doesn't believe in doctors. Why did you ask about drugs?"

"Because apparently Mr. Ogenrick died of an overdose of an illegal tranquilizer called flunitrazepam. Would you say he'd been depressed recently?" She shook her head vigorously. "Had he ever been under treatment for mental or emotional illness?" More negation. "Had he ever talked about killing himself, or tried to do it?"

"No, and I can tell you right now he didn't kill himself. Poison costs money, and he could have jumped off the roof for nothing."

"Are you saying he was tight with his money?"

"Exactly. He could have given lessons to Scrooge. He lived right upstairs so he wouldn't have to drive to work every day. He didn't own a car, and he wouldn't call a cab unless he could charge it to a client. When he had a case in federal

court, he'd walk all the way over to Franklin Street even if it was pouring rain. And pick up pennies out of the gutter on the way." Her tone was jarring and brittle, not at all suggesting the indulgent and faithful servant. "I'm not sure, but I think he bought his razor blades one at a time."

"What about the imported suits and the gallons of scotch he was supposed to drink?"

"The suits were a business expense, and the scotch was mostly bummed from clients. I doubt if they'll find so much as a fifth of it upstairs."

"In his apartment, you mean? Who's 'they'?"

"The authorities, whoever searches a dead person's house. Maybe you?"

"Maybe," conceded Auburn. "Would you have a key?"

"Mr. Ogenrick trusted me to handle his accounts receivable and file his records, but no, I don't have a key to his apartment. I've never even been in it. His nephew Kevin might have one, but I doubt it."

"Is Kevin in today?"

"Yes, but he's seeing clients this morning. By the way, don't let him hear you call him Kevin."

"You said Mr. Ogenrick picked up pennies out of the gutter. What else did he pick up?"

"Oh, everything. Pens, if they hadn't been run over too many times. Rusty nuts and bolts that had fallen off cars. Once he brought in a monkey wrench about a yard long, dripping with muck."

"What did he do with the things he picked up?"

"Probably squirreled them away upstairs. For all I know, he sold them to junk dealers by the pound."

"You said he bummed drinks from clients. Was there anyone in particular he might have been drinking with on Sunday?"

"That I couldn't say."

"Did he use a pocket memo book or engagement calendar of some kind? The coroner's investigator didn't find one on his body. Maybe somewhere here in the office..."

She shook her head.

"I took care of scheduling his appointments. But I wasn't in charge of his social engagements, and I was out of town myself from Friday night to Sunday night." Her voice faltered and became quieter. "I try to get away on weekends. My husband just died on the twelfth of August."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. It was a mercy when he went. Harry was a field engineer for a mining company. He had an accident more than ten years ago that left him crippled and mentally disabled. So I went to work again . . . and every day at noon I went home, and..."

Sobbing fitfully, she dissolved in a flood of tears. Auburn was looking around for a box of tissues when Kevin Ogenrick appeared in the doorway.

No one familiar with Tibor Ogenrick's pictures in the papers could have doubted that this was a relative. Although Kevin hadn't yet developed his uncle's gaunt, saturnine cast of countenance, he had the same high forehead and the same arrogant, beaklike nose,

which he was just now thrusting in Auburn's direction like a saber.

"What's this all about?" he wanted to know.

"It's all right," said Mrs. Styles. "It's my fault I got upset. He's just doing his job."

"Which is what?" His manner was both protective and pugnacious. Auburn thought he might have been about twenty-five.

"Investigating the death of Mr. Tibor Ogenrick." Auburn stood up and showed identification.

"Police? Who called you in?"

"The coroner's office. The laboratory studies showed that Mr. Ogenrick's death was probably due to an overdose of an illegal drug called flunitrazepam."

Kevin Ogenrick stared at him, his brows knitted. "You'd better come with me. If you're through grilling Mrs. Styles." He turned and vanished through a door without looking back.

The younger Ogenrick's office had a window opening onto an airwell. File folders lay in neat stacks alongside the computer on the credenza behind the desk. "Now, what's this about a drug overdose?"

"The coroner feels the blood level was high enough to account for Mr. Ogenrick's fall on the stairs. Were you aware that he ever used drugs?"

"Certainly not." He was trying to maintain a poker face, but it was evident that the wheels were turning briskly.

"Mrs. Styles doesn't think it was suicide. Would you agree?"

A pause. "Conditionally. I don't know exactly what went on in my

uncle's head. Nobody ever did. But I wouldn't call him the suicidal type."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Probably about this time on Friday morning. He did his thing and I did mine. Sometimes we didn't run into each other for three or four days at a time."

"Will you be assuming control of the practice, or are there other partners?"

Kevin Ogenrick leaned forward and put both palms flat on his desk. "I'd better set you straight about something, officer. I was my uncle's employee, not his partner. I'm not even an attorney. The other Ogenrick in the firm was my father, who died when I was six."

"Sorry, I just imagined—"

"Most people do. I'm a CPA. I'm working nights and weekends on a law degree, but for the time being my uncle's death pretty much puts me out of a job. There aren't any partners."

"According to the coroner's records, you're Mr. Ogenrick's next of kin. I understand he never married. Are there other relatives?"

"Just my sister Kelly."

"I assume your uncle made a will —"

"He never mentioned the subject. If he did, we haven't found it."

"I don't want to take up a lot of your time, I know you have people waiting, but I have to ask the routine questions about any recent threats against your uncle, any problems or conflicts with clients or others."

"Mrs. Styles would know more

about that than I do. My uncle's life was one long series of conflicts."

"There's a possibility that the drug overdose was given to him in an alcoholic drink. Can you think of anyone he might have been drinking with on Sunday evening?"

"He'd drink any time, any place, as long as the other guy was buying. I understand he had a speaking engagement at the Dockside over on Fifth Street that night. But he obviously never got near there."

"Did you happen to see your uncle at any time on Sunday?"

"No, sir. Sunday is the only day I could get out from under his thumb. I spent the day canoeing on the lake out at Rolland State Park."

"Even though you're not a partner, I suppose you're in charge now that your uncle is dead. I'd like to take a look at his private office, to see if he made notes of any meetings earlier in the day on Sunday." Knowing that he wasn't dealing with a full-fledged lawyer, Auburn voiced the request with a breezy air of confidence.

Kevin Ogenrick bridled slightly. "There's a lot of confidential material here."

"I'm not going to breach any confidences. And I'm not collecting evidence, just looking for leads."

He gave in with a shrug of resignation. Of course, thought Auburn, the trail was cold, as Stamaty had already remarked. Anything they didn't want the police to find had disappeared from the premises yesterday.

The senior Ogenrick's office was as opulent and ostentatious as his thousand-dollar imported suits,

and not nearly so orderly as his nephew's. "I don't see a computer," remarked Auburn.

"He wouldn't use one, didn't know a mouse from a motherboard. It's only been three or four years since we got them in the office. They're absolutely essential for the work I do, which includes taxes, auditing, and credit checks and pre-employment probes for local businesses, but my uncle insisted on muddling along with pen and paper."

He excused himself to see a client. Almost at once Mrs. Styles, now perfectly composed, appeared in Tibor Ogenrick's office, ostensibly to help Auburn search but actually, no doubt, to keep an eye on the spoons. Auburn spent half an hour rooting among reams of legal-size yellow paper and dozens of odd scraps bearing scribbled notes on cases but found nothing to indicate where or with whom Ogenrick might have been drinking on Sunday.

"Well," said Auburn, closing the last desk drawer, "maybe I'll come up with something upstairs in his apartment."

By this time Kevin was back in the office. "Have the police applied for a warrant?"

Auburn had been expecting this. "I understand Mr. Ogenrick was the sole tenant of the apartment." He paused briefly but neither of them contradicted him. "Since he's deceased, the interests of the Public Safety Department in investigating his death override the rights of his legal heirs, whoever they may be." He rattled it off exactly as if he knew what he was talking about.

"There's just one problem," said Ogenrick with an arch frown. "We don't have a key to the apartment, so you're going to have to go through the building management and they may not buy your argument about not needing a warrant."

"That's my worry," said Auburn, convinced that the nephew had already tried and failed to get into his uncle's apartment. "Before I go, there's just one other question. Had Mr. Ogenrick been in Canada recently?"

They both looked blank.

Auburn was conscious of a certain perverse sense of triumph as he unlocked the door to Tibor Ogenrick's apartment and crossed its threshold. Ogenrick had done law enforcement authorities in the eye too many times for Auburn to feel the slightest grief at his passing. On the contrary, the prospect of uprooting his darkest secrets, and perhaps reciting them in court, filled him with wicked joy.

But after all, his search of the apartment proved depressing and unrewarding. The place was cramped and untidy, the typical lair of a middle-aged bachelor with no interests outside his work. Auburn found a chipped crockery mug full of coins, mostly pennies, that Ogenrick had no doubt picked out of gutters. Other prizes of similar origin lying here and there in drawers and on windowsills bore further witness to his packrat tendencies. A quick search turned up no memo book or personal calendar and no trace of anything that looked like illegal drugs.

But there were a couple of sur-

prises. Contrary to Marjorie Styles' prediction, the place was well stocked with liquor, and several of the bottles had broken seals. And contrary to all expectations, Ogenrick had a personal computer, which Auburn found turned on.

He locked the apartment and walked back to headquarters without making a second visit to the offices of Ogenrick & Ogenrick. After hearing his progress report, his immediate superior, Lieutenant Savage, agreed to dispatch an evidence technician to the apartment to obtain specimens from the kitchen and bar, and a computer expert to recover all possible data from Ogenrick's PC.

When Auburn phoned Kaspersen's Kennels on Heron Pike, he got an answering machine. A brittle, businesslike, female voice announced that the office would be closed until Monday because of a death in the family. He left a message asking Mrs. Kaspersen to call him, giving both headquarters and home phone numbers. Then, because the weather was mild and he had nothing better to do, he made the twenty-five minute drive to Heron Pike.

Kaspersen's Kennels were situated on a wedge-shaped tract of former farmland just outside the suburb of Heron Township. He passed under a flamboyant wrought-iron arch bearing a sign (BOARDING—GROOMING—OBEDIENCE TRAINING—AKC GOLDEN RETRIEVERS) and along a graveled drive to a frame house with a series of ugly low cinder-block buildings behind it.

He parked next to a station wagon with a steel cage built into the rear compartment and climbed the steps to the porch. His knock was answered by a woman in her thirties.

"Mrs. Kaspersen?" he asked. The question was purely a formality; she had the Ogenrick nose.

"Yes." Long blonde hair hung down both sides of her face like a pair of curtains that didn't quite meet in the middle.

Auburn showed identification. "I'm sorry if this is inconvenient, but I need to talk with you for a few minutes to finish up our investigation of your uncle's death. Do you have time to answer some questions?"

She stared at him sullenly through the screen door. "You need to talk to me?"

"Just police routine. You probably haven't heard it yet, but the autopsy found evidence of poisoning. We have to follow up and file a report."

She let him in, slamming the door behind him with what seemed like unnecessary violence. He couldn't tell whether she was hostile to him in particular or everybody in general. Maybe the idea that her uncle had been poisoned was a little hard to handle. Maybe she didn't like dealing with people in authority who happened to be African-American. Maybe things weren't going too well in the dog business.

The room they were in was part office and part living room. Above a low coffee table littered with cups, plates, sewing articles, and women's magazines, a ceiling fan turned

lazily and to little purpose. Against one wall were steel file cabinets and a steel desk. Windows at the side commanded a view of the out-buildings.

No dogs were in sight, and any barking from outside would have been drowned out by the blare of rock music from somewhere upstairs and the squawking and gibbering of a game show on the TV in the corner.

Kelly Kaspersen made no move to turn off the television but stood ten feet away from Auburn, hands on hips. The wrists sticking out of her sweatshirt sleeves were as tanned and muscular as a brick-layer's.

Auburn opened a new pack of three-by-five-inch file cards, slipped one out, and wrote her name and address in a top corner. "I guess the first thing I should ask is how that idea strikes you—that your uncle's death was due to a drug overdose."

"I think it's absolute nonsense. It's just . . . sick."

"You wouldn't say he was the type to commit suicide?"

"No, I certainly would not." She dropped ungracefully into a chair. "My uncle got too much fun out of life, making people crawl and hoarding his money while his own flesh and blood were practically starving."

"Meaning you?"

She opened the throttle. "Meaning me and my daughter, and my younger brother Kevin. When our mother died, Uncle Ti was appointed guardian. There wasn't much money, but whatever there was, we never saw any of it. Kevin put him-

self through college by working five nights a week cleaning offices. I'm a single parent trying to survive in a business where the competition is cutthroat. I could have used a little help in the past couple of years to meet my overhead and keep myself and Karyn somewhere above the poverty level."

"I get the idea you and your uncle weren't close. Did you see him very often—visit him at his place, have him out to dinner . . ."

"Never. I haven't seen him or talked to him for more than a year."

A girl in her early teens bounded down the stairs wearing a black motorcycle shirt and stone-washed jeans decorated with dozens of stainless steel studs arranged in geometric figures. She got as far as the doorway, stopped, and bounded back up the stairs without saying a word.

"Well, anyway," remarked Auburn, "I suppose things will be a little better for you and your daughter after your uncle's estate is settled?"

"Maybe. I really hadn't thought about it."

Auburn had little patience with barefaced liars and was apt to show it. Besides, the espresso was wearing off. "About how many dogs do you have back there, Mrs. Kasper-sen?"

"Thirty-one, including two boarders."

"Do some of them get sick once in a while?"

"Not very often. I take better care of my dogs than people who have them as pets. I have to—they're my business."

"But you probably call in a vet sometimes? Have to give them medicine for things they pick up?" She saw where his questions were leading and grew shorter than ever.

"Our vet gives them shots for rabies and distemper. Sometimes he has to come out to see a dog I'm boarding, but my retrievers don't 'pick up things.'"

"Ever have to put a dog to sleep?"

"Never," she said, with her teeth clamped together. "That's not the business I'm in."

She sat wordless, simmering with hostility, as Auburn thanked her and let himself out.

Before lunch he called Tom Downey, the insurance agent who had arranged the dinner speech that Ogenrick hadn't lived long enough to deliver, to set up an appointment for one o'clock. They met at Downey's office, which occupied a converted residence in the north suburbs. The insurance man was an unmitigated extrovert with the parboiled and corrugated complexion of the golf addict.

"When I think how we cussed that poor son of a bean for not showing up, and all the time he was lying dead somewhere. . . . Are they going to sue the building people?" Trust an insurance man, Auburn thought, to think first of the liability angle.

"Not that I know of. The reason we're investigating his death is that it was apparently due, at least in part, to an overdose of an illicit tranquilizer."

Downey used the kind of language a man resorts to when he's three over par and knocks the little

white ball into a pond covered with green slime. "I knew he was fond of the sauce, but I never thought of him as a dope fiend."

"We don't think he was one, either. We think he was poisoned."

"That could work," nodded Downey. "He didn't care who he let see his rough side."

"Do you know of anyone in particular who had it in for him?"

"No, sir."

"Would anybody have had a reason to silence him before he gave that speech Sunday night?"

"Could be. He was supposed to be talking to a roomful of insurance agents and underwriters, giving away all the loopholes and dirty tricks lawyers use to get around the exclusions and escape clauses the insurance people put in their policies."

"Do you have any idea where Ogenrick might have been earlier Sunday afternoon?"

"No, sir. I hadn't talked to him since we set up the speech, back in September." He rocked back pensively in his desk chair. "Poison, huh? They say that's a woman's weapon."

"Know of any women in his life?"

"No, sir. I doubt if that son of a bean ever even had a mother."

Aaron Wiggins was just getting off work at the distribution depot of the bottling company for which he drove a truck. From Auburn's standpoint, Wiggins was the perfect witness—stolid and literal-minded, with the imagination of a coal-miner and the integrity of an archbishop.

He'd parked his A-frame beverage truck in the alley behind the Garner Building around nine A.M. yesterday and taken a dolly-load of soft drinks up the freight elevator to the second-level refreshment area. Happening to glance toward the stairway, he'd seen the body of a man sprawled motionless and facedown just above the landing.

Wiggins had had CPR training. Approaching the body, he'd "tapped and called" as he'd been taught, only to discover that the man was cold and stiff.

Although there were pay phones in the refreshment area, he'd looked for an open office on the second floor and, finding none, had run up a flight to use the phone in the law office opposite the stairway door.

The secretary there had gone down to look at the dead man and identified him as her boss before calling the police. After that Wiggins had stood guard over the body until the police came. He thought he might have seen Ogenrick in the building before but couldn't be sure. Neither he nor the secretary had altered the position of the body.

Auburn went back to his office and got out the plastic bag of objects Stamaty had found on Ogenrick's body. In his early teens he had devoured detective and adventure stories avidly. Then the brutal murder of a classmate had suddenly shown him the difference between neat little games of logic on paper and the harsh reality of death, which could, in an instant, turn a citizen into a skinful of expensive chemicals in unstable equi-

librium. The resulting reaction had jelled into a vocation in law enforcement and a distaste for crime fiction.

But he still remembered his fascination with tales in which a police detective, a private eye, or an Indian tracker retraced someone's steps using subtle clues that were invisible to others. That was pretty much the sort of puzzle he was faced with now, except that, instead of leaving traces along his route, Ogenrick had picked up pieces of the route and taken them along with him. Would a study of the resulting collection of oddments enable Auburn to reconstruct his movements during the last hour or two of his life?

A call to the Traffic and Parking Division yielded the information that plastic NO PARKING TODAY signs had been slipped over parking meters at seven sites in the city during the past two weeks. He made a note of these and then located each on a large-scale map.

Only two of them were within reasonable walking distance for someone starting—or ending—at the Garner Building. Since he couldn't envision the late Tibor Ogenrick snatching a sign off a parking meter, he assumed that he'd picked this one up from the ground where it had fallen or been thrown, or blown, when the parking prohibition had ended. That pointed to the four hundred block of East Monroe, where sidewalk repairs had been completed on Friday, since work was still in progress at the other downtown site.

He made a photocopy of the

downtown section of the map and put crosses for the Garner Building and the area where he thought the parking meter sign might have come from.

He noted with satisfaction that, had Ogenrick been walking from the latter site to his dinner engagement at the Dockside Restaurant, the Garner Building would have been on his route. Maybe he had entered the building to visit the office or his apartment, or both; possibly by that time he was feeling the ill effects of the poison.

Where to go from here? Even the sidewalk repair site was pure conjecture, but now Auburn had to determine where, and in what order, Ogenrick had picked up a wheel-balancing weight, a Canadian nickel, a yellow marble, and a tie tack (or was it a cufflink?). It was around two thirty when he folded the map, put it into his pocket along with the four objects, and headed for the Garner Building.

Having arrived there, he set off to backtrack the route Ogenrick was most likely to have taken. The four hundred block of East Monroe was in a retail district on the south fringe of downtown. Auburn kept a sharp eye on the establishments he passed in the feeble hope of finding a store that might sell men's jewelry or yellow marbles, or a bar or a restaurant serving Sunday liquor where Ogenrick might have been slipped the lethal drink. He tried to keep near the edge of the sidewalk so he could watch the gutter but found he was constantly dodging other pedestrians who seemed determined to do the same

thing. The gutter contained mostly dead leaves and cigarette butts.

He passed banks, business buildings, apartment houses, a church, a theater, a hotel, a bus station . . . Clearly it would take hours to follow all the possible routes in this fashion, checking both sides of the streets.

Auburn took out the four objects and examined them again. The lead alloy body of the balancing weight and its spring-steel clip were shiny and bore still shinier scratches. Probably it had only recently been attached to a wheel and fallen off again into the street when Ogenrick found it. The further conclusion that he had picked it up near a gas station or a tire store seemed a little far-fetched. But when Auburn had nearly reached East Monroe, he did indeed see a tire store across the street. On the chance that that was where the wheel weight had come from, he crossed over.

It was one of those fall days that start out warm and turn gray and brisk and breezy by afternoon. With each step he took, the hopelessness of his task seemed more evident.

When he got to the stretch of Monroe where the sidewalk had recently been patched, he was faced with a perplexing variety of choices. He continued east on Monroe.

Near the corner of Highmore his attention was attracted by a jeweler at work in a shallow bay window that stuck out over the sidewalk. He entered the store.

"Last time I saw you," said the jeweler, whose name was Stoltz, "you were packing a rod."

"I didn't think you'd remember."

"Eleven years ago Valentine's Day. Did those guys clean me out? I never got any of it back, either. But the insurance people liked the report you wrote up. You still a policeman?"

"Detective. Longer hours, longer reports."

"What do you need? Engagement ring?"

"What can you tell me about this?"

Stoltz took the article of jewelry between his fingers, held it up to the light, and peered at Auburn over the tops of his glasses. "I can tell you somebody stepped on it," he said. "Is this something you're trying to trace?"

"Yes."

"Let me just muse and reflect here a bit, officer, without putting too much of a strain on my coronaries. This is a piece of trash. The stone is manmade. This filigree work is dye-stamped out of pot metal and electroplated with some glitzy sheep dip you could scrape off with your fingernail. The whole thing looks like it was designed by a plumber." He handed it back and wiped his hands on his apron as if he had been handling a dead rat.

"I won't even ask if you have any of these in stock. Where, within walking distance of here, would a person go to buy one?"

"Mellow Motley, over on Kossuth. Don't tell 'em I sent you."

Auburn set off for Kossuth, five blocks farther east. He found himself walking along a street of trim brick bungalows on deep, narrow lots that had been built between

the world wars. Their back yards blended into a vast tract of land occupied by freight yards, warehouses, fuel storage tanks, and radio towers.

The house on the corner had been converted to a dentist's office. In the front yard of another, seven children were playing tag and stomping the last remnants of the lawn into oblivion. The front porch of this house looked like a toyshop after a tornado—two tricycles, bubble-blowing paraphernalia, plastic jumpropes in electric colors, a child-sized cycling helmet that seemed to have been used as a mixing bowl for mud pies, and a rain-damaged board game from which marbles of various colors, including canary yellow, had escaped and rolled everywhere. Auburn stalked forward with renewed hope and energy.

"I'm back here, officer." The voice of Marjorie Styles came to him from between two houses. "I just happened to look up and see you through the trellis."

Auburn walked back along the driveway to where Mrs. Styles, now dressed for leisure, was setting out the trash. A wheelchair ramp extended from the back door of the house to the garage. "Have there been some further developments?" she asked.

Auburn thought fast. Had he come to the end of the trail?

"Not exactly. I just wondered if there might be some things you'd be more comfortable talking about without Kevin Ogenrick hanging around in the background."

She gave him an odd glance. Between the garage and the hedge

that ran across the rear of the property stood a makeshift structure of scrap lumber and chicken wire. An unpracticed hand had burned the name Bonfiglio into one of the weathered boards. Tufts of fine black fur clung to the wire mesh.

"Rabbits or guinea pigs?" asked Auburn.

"One rabbit. Mr. Ogenrick's grandniece Karyn won him at a fair a couple of years ago, but she couldn't keep him at home because the scent bothered the dogs. It didn't bother my cats because they're indoor people." She pointed to two tawny short-haired cats that reclined in lazy majesty in a side window like stone gods in a pagan shrine.

Auburn examined the cage. "Bonfiglio? Fancy name for a rabbit."

"She named him after the dry cleaner's. One of their trucks was the first thing she saw after she got him."

"Where does she have him now?"

"She doesn't. He disappeared a couple of weeks ago, the last time I spent a weekend with my sister in Michigan. He lost a lot of weight during the summer. Anyway, a lot of fur. He probably squeezed out the opening at the top. Unless some of the neighbor kids turned him loose."

"You don't think Mr. Ogenrick's grandniece might have come by and taken him home with her?"

"I'm pretty sure she didn't. I doubt if she even remembers him. Karyn's a carbon copy of her mother. Thirteen going on thirty and hard as nails. It's been years since

she called me Aunt Marjorie." She looked at the darkening sky. "Shall we go inside? It's getting cold out here."

They entered by the kitchen door and passed through the dining room, where the cats maintained their impassive vigil, into a living room.

"You have a comfortable place here," Auburn remarked. "Close to work, too, isn't it?"

"Very. I could probably hoof it if I had the gumption."

"I suppose Mr. Ogenrick used to drop in sometimes when he happened to be walking by?"

"Never," she assured him. "I don't think he had the faintest idea where we lived. And if he had, he wouldn't have bothered to visit us because there hasn't been a drop of liquor in this house in the past ten years."

"Yet his grandniece boarded her pet rabbit here with you."

"That was different. I went to school with Kevin and Kelly's mother. That's how I happened to start working for her brother-in-law when I had to find a job."

"Was there anything else you wanted to mention privately?" asked Auburn, eager to abandon a topic that might lead to more tears.

"Well, yes. Maybe I shouldn't tell you this, but I'm probably out of a job anyway. I heard Kevin tell you his uncle hadn't made a will. He did make one, though, and I'm pretty sure Kevin must have found it when he went through the safe yesterday."

"Do you know the terms of the will?"

"No. But I remember that three or four years ago, just before Kevin started to work in the office, Mr. Ogenrick said he had drafted a will for himself and was going to have two friends witness it."

"That's interesting. That he had two friends, I mean."

When Auburn arrived back at headquarters, Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician, was just reporting to Lieutenant Savage on his findings at Ogenrick's apartment. Kestrel never touched alcohol or tobacco and didn't bother to conceal his contempt for anyone who did. He'd brought seven opened bottles of liquor to the lab, along with various other specimens from the kitchen and the bathroom.

"Did Rifkin come up with anything on the computer?" Auburn asked him.

"He was copying things on floppies when I left."

Rifkin still hadn't reported in when Auburn went home after six.

By Wednesday morning preliminary background checks were available on Kevin Ogenrick and his sister Kelly Kaspersen, Marjorie Styles, Tom Downey, and Aaron Wiggins. None had police records, bad credit, or dubious associations. The late Doris Ogenrick, Kevin and Kelly's mother, had left everything to her children in her will and appointed her brother-in-law Tibor as executor and guardian. Kelly was divorced, and Kevin had never been married.

At ten A.M. Auburn met briefly with Savage and Rifkin before proceeding with Rifkin to the Garner Building. They went not to Ogen-

rick's apartment but to the law office.

A sign on the door stated that the office would be closed the next day for the funeral, but both Kevin Ogenrick and Marjorie Styles were at work today. They expressed surprise at seeing Auburn again, and they were incredulous when they learned that Tibor Ogenrick had had a personal computer in his apartment.

"We'd like to have a look at what's on your computers here in the office," said Auburn. "For all we know, Mr. Ogenrick may have entered data when nobody was around that could help us in our investigation."

Kevin Ogenrick started squirming. "How could he have done that without a password? I don't even know Marjorie's, and she doesn't know mine."

"That remains to be seen," said Auburn. He introduced Reuben Rifkin, the department's civilian computer geek, who looked as coy and harmless as a shoe salesman.

"If you've already logged on," said Rifkin, "I can just scan your hard disks without knowing what your passwords are."

Neither of them liked it, but apparently it didn't occur to them to refuse. Which was just as well, since the law of search and seizure as it applied to computer data was as indeterminate as the definition of presidential misconduct in office.

Auburn had a very late lunch that day.

Around four he again conferred with Savage. "I've got a hunch about that rabbit," he said.

"The rabbit? What's its name again? Bunny Pink?"

"Bonfiglio. Like the dry cleaner's." He explained his hunch.

"That's city property," said Savage.

"That's the beauty of it."

"You still need a warrant."

Tibor Ogenrick's funeral was at ten thirty Thursday morning. At ten thirty-five Auburn and Kestrel pulled up and parked in front of Marjorie Styles' house in the evidence van—"the only vehicle in the force with running water."

The man with the bloodhounds, Nick and Nora, came separately.

For the next several hours Auburn and company were fully occupied with desk work, lab work, phone work, computer and fax work, and even a little old fashioned leg work.

On Friday morning Auburn was again at the law offices, this time accompanied by Patrolman Fritz Dollinger. The waiting room was empty today, and the candles in the jack-o'-lantern had burned down and not been replaced. Mrs. Styles told them Kevin Ogenrick was tied up in his office with a conference call.

"That's just as well," said Auburn. "You're the one I want to talk to. I'd like you to tell me a little more about the rabbit."

"I'm sorry?"

"Bonfiglio. You said it disappeared a couple of weeks ago."

"That's right. While I was out of town."

"You were out of town a couple of weeks ago when the rabbit disap-

peared, and again this past weekend when Mr. Ogenrick died."

She stirred restlessly. "That's right. I was visiting my sister and brother-in-law both times."

"I think you said your sister lives in Michigan?"

"Royal Oak."

"Did you fly there both times?"

"Yes, to Detroit Metro. Ed and May Rose met me there in their van."

"Who looked after your cats while you were away? Or did you take them along?"

"Are you kidding? Take those guys on a plane? No, Mr. Ogenrick went in a couple of times a day to check on them and water the plants."

"Mr. Ogenrick?"

"Kevin."

No sooner had she said the name than the man himself emerged from his office. He scowled at Dollinger's uniform with an elaborate show of distaste. "Here for your daily visit?" he asked Auburn.

"This will probably be the last time," Auburn reassured him. "I was just getting ready to tell Mrs. Styles that we found your niece's rabbit Bonfiglio yesterday morning."

Kevin Ogenrick's scowl deepened.

"You found a *rabbit*? I thought you were trying to find a murderer."

"I think we managed that, too. The rabbit had been buried in a plot of waste ground behind Mrs. Styles' house. It was cremated at the police lab this morning, after an analysis of its internal organs showed that it had died of the same

drug that killed Tibor Ogenrick. Whoever murdered Ogenrick evidently gave a trial dose to the rabbit first, to see if it would detect the taste. I don't imagine you slipped it to the rabbit in scotch, though, did you, Mr. Ogenrick?"

The color drained from Kevin Ogenrick's face like sand running out of an hourglass, and he put his back to a wall as if he needed support. "You'd better be careful what you say before witnesses," he said, his mouth suddenly very dry. "You're as good as accusing me of murdering my uncle."

"No, I'm *arresting* you for murdering your uncle, with a drink of doctored scotch, after inviting him to meet you at Mrs. Styles' house on Sunday afternoon. Patrolman Dollinger has the arrest warrant, and he's going to read you your rights." Dollinger complied.

Kevin chose not to remain silent. "I think we can clear this up right here," he said. "I didn't poison any rabbit, let alone my uncle, and you can't prove I did."

"It's not my job to prove it. But I don't think the city prosecutor will have any trouble convincing a jury of your guilt when he lays out all the evidence against you."

"Such as?"

"You said you couldn't find your uncle's will. We found a copy of it stored on his computer, leaving this practice and half his personal assets to you. I don't doubt that there is a hard copy of the will somewhere here in the office that you're planning to produce at the strategic moment."

"What you don't doubt," snorted

Kevin belligerently, "isn't worth a whole lot in a court of law."

"You also said no one but you knows the password to your computer. That means only you could use it to access the Internet. You may not be aware of it, but a personal computer stores data on all the Web sites you've visited, at least for a while, in a cache that can be accessed by anybody who knows which icons to click. Yesterday our expert found that your computer had been used to search for information on drugs and poisons, specifically on flunitrazepam."

By now Kevin had himself half convinced that Auburn didn't really have a case against him. "Do you call that proof?"

"Your uncle's private phone in his apartment has an attachment that shows the number from which each incoming call is made, and it records the last ten calls received. The last call made to that phone, at three forty-five on Sunday, came from Mrs. Styles' house. Assuming that Mrs. Styles can prove she was in Michigan at that hour, or en route from there, the call must have been made by someone else having access to her house. You had to have a key if you were looking after her cats and her houseplants."

Mrs. Styles, nearly as distraught as Ogenrick, confirmed Auburn's surmise with a silent nod.

Kevin was still shaking his head. "It's not proof."

"There's a little more," Auburn promised him. "Maybe you realized that your uncle had caught on to the extortion racket you were running right under his nose, maybe not. But the notes of his suspicions that he had entered in his computer were what gave us our first leads."

"We followed up on some of the pre-employment probes you've done in the past few weeks. When we repeated the background searches, using basically the same resources you did, we found four people with police records that you failed to report to their prospective employers."

"Three of them paid somebody a hundred dollars in cash to have their records suppressed. When we showed them a stack of pictures, including an enlargement of the one on your driver's license, they all picked you as the person they paid off. The fourth one was the one you got the supply of flunitrazepam from. Do I need to go on?"

For months afterwards, whenever Auburn was walking along city sidewalks he found himself scanning the gutters for dropped articles. Once he stooped to pick up what looked like a muddy quarter, but it turned out to be a bottle cap.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Swindler in the Family

Robert Standish



The whitehaired soldierly man at the window end of the breakfast room glanced with distaste at the envelope on the top of the pile. It bore an East African stamp and postmark and was addressed to General Sir Reginald Slumgullion, K.C.B., K.C.S.I., K.C.M.G., D.S.O. Taking the letter by one corner with the sugar tongs, he pitched it somewhat ostentatiously into the fireplace, where a pile of damp logs was emitting vast billows of smoke and no heat worth mentioning.

"Reggie," said the deep contralto voice of Lady Slumgullion accusingly, "you didn't even open that letter. Who was it from?"

"I don't need to open the letter, my dear Matilda, in order to know what is in it. I know from the handwriting on the envelope, which is that of your brother Horace, that it is an attempt to separate me from what little money I still possess. Read it if you wish, but I actively prefer not to know the sordid details."

With an agility surprising in such a ponderous woman, Matilda retrieved the smoke-blackened envelope and opened it. Holding the letter in the left hand, she continued to ingurgitate a large plate of porridge and cream with the right.

As she read the letter, Matilda wished that her husband's prediction as to its contents had not been so uncannily accurate. During a long and dishonorable financial career, Horace had only just retained his liberty after two quite disgraceful bankruptcies and a brush with the law, which he had won on an ingenious technicality.

Horace now wrote on the letterhead of the Mountains of the Moon Mining and Exploration Company, Limited, whose address was a post office box at Kitoro, Ruwenzori Province, Uganda, and of which he was chairman and managing director. Briefly, Horace's company had been engaged in mining wolfram, but had found a "fabulously rich deposit of alluvial gold" and all he needed to make them all "rich as Croesus" was a few thousand pounds to dam a small lake which "will provide us with virtually unlimited water power."

The letter ended with a cordial invitation for Reggie and Matilda to come and stay at the mine as long as they liked, see and handle the gold themselves, enjoy good trout fishing and "probably the best big-game shooting in the entire world."

"Reggie," said Matilda, helping herself to a rasher of ham and two fried eggs, "let's go. What's to stop us? I'm tired of housework, smoking chimneys, and trying to make two pounds do the work of three. What do you say?"

"I'm perfectly ready to go, my dear. I find your brother Horace a likable rascal. I am always pleased to see him. But I flatly decline to have anything more to do with his preposterous swindles. By all means, let

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us go to the Mountains of the Moon and live at his expense. I will go to London this morning to buy the air tickets and make inquiries about the necessary inoculations and other formalities. But—" he paused for emphasis "—before we go, let it be understood that we have no financial dealings with him whatsoever."

An old friend of the Slumgullions, Colonel Chessington Bundy, D.S.O., recently a widower and feeling the need of a change, decided all at once to accompany them. It is a tribute to Horace Wimpole's charm that Colonel Bundy, although twice a victim of the former's swindles, bore him no ill will.

An overnight flight from London took these three elderly adventurers to Entebbe on the muggy shores of Lake Victoria. Here was the first hitch in their plans. Horace was not there to meet them. There was not even a message from him. Inquiry through official channels elicited the information that Horace's mine was eighty-odd miles from the nearest telephone and that mail probably did not reach him more than once a month. Someone else provided the general with the information that an Indian merchant in Kampala, twenty-two miles distant, was purchasing agent for the mine and was the only man likely to know anything.

From him it was learned by phone that a truckload of stores was leaving for the mine in the morning and that, provided the trio did not expect too much in the way of luxury, three places were available to them.

The dawn start was delayed while Lady Slumgullion struggled into a pair of thornproof jodhpurs bought twenty years previously in Bombay, whose capacity had remained static while that of Lady Slumgullion's posterior had not.

The two men sat on the hard wooden seat of the truck beside the African driver, while a somewhat flimsy steel and canvas chair was made available for the lady, which was extremely comfortable while the truck was bowling along the fine paved road leading out of Kampala westward. "Good road like this all the way?" asked the general.

"Yes," replied the driver, using the only word of English he knew.

Just then the paved road ended, and the truck hit a series of potholes in the dirt road, which deteriorated with every mile farther west. Lady Slumgullion, in danger of being seasick, changed places with her husband.

No understanding had been reached with the driver of the truck regarding accommodation en route. The three passengers took it for granted that they would stop for the night at some adequate hotel where at least a cold shower, a cold whisky and soda, dinner, and a clean bed could be obtained, but they learned too late that in Africa nothing must be taken for granted except dust, heat, and flies.

At about ten P.M., having been driving in his sleep for some while, the driver stopped the truck beside a swamp. He and five deck passengers

who had been riding on top of the load, built a barricade of bales and cases around the truck and went to sleep on the ground underneath. Lady Slumgullion, who was hot and tired, hungry and thirsty, and had just discovered that for the last five hours she had been sitting on a spanner, was somewhat peevish. She longed for some cool, flowing garment as a change from the dangerously tight jodhpurs.

Lions roared close at hand. Hyenas made the night hideous with their obscene, cacophonous laughter. Hippopotamuses grunted and wallowed in the swamp, from which came clouds of ravenous mosquitoes. But it was the unidentified sounds that were the hardest to bear, peopling the night with nameless horrors. Three upper lips remained stiff, with a slight tendency to quiver.

Dawn came, spreading its gray light across a featureless plain. Lady Slumgullion leaned her elbow on the horn to awaken the driver. In a clump of thornbush something stirred. Two tons of antediluvian fury came out into the open, squinted meanly at the truck, and charged. There came a horrifying crash and the shrieking of tortured metal as a rhinoceros galloped off the field triumphant, with the near-side fender of the truck impaled upon its horn.

"Who did that?" asked the general, awakened from a fitful sleep.

"Reggie," said his wife in a contralto that miraculously was become a soprano, "I insist that you do something. If you had the smallest consideration for me, you would not have allowed me to endure these horrors."

"My dear Matilda," said her unhappy husband, "Horace is your brother, not mine, thank God."

The driver emerged from beneath the truck, having quite obviously enjoyed a dreamless night's sleep. The deck passengers reloaded the bales and cases. One touch of the self-starter set the diesel engine roaring. A crested crane rose from the swamp and resumed fishing. The driver let in the clutch, and they were off again. Six minutes or three miles farther on, a sign read BEAR RIGHT FOR ELEPHANT LODGE. LUXURIOUS COTTAGES, REFRIGERATION, MEALS AT ALL HOURS.

The driver of the truck drove straight on. With great presence of mind Lady Slumgullion leaned forward, switched off the ignition, and confiscated the key. "One more hour in those jodhpurs," she said darkly, "would have killed me. I'm not the woman I was."

"To me you are, my pet, the only difference being that there's so much more of you," said the general as the trio staggered dazedly into Elephant Lodge.

"Going to visit old Horace, eh?" said the proprietor of the hotel that evening when his three guests emerged from their quarters. "But why punish yourselves by coming this way?"

"Which way should we have come?" asked the general bleakly.

"You could have gone by car, through Kabale and over the Kanaba Gap into the Belgian Ruanda-Urundi, approaching Horace's place from the Belgian side. The truck has to come this way because of customs complications.

"I suppose you realize," added their informant, "that from this side you've a twelve mile walk after the road ends? I'm amazed that Horace didn't tell you."

"Horace doesn't know we're coming," replied his sister.

The trio went to bed again immediately after dinner and on the following morning, in a car hired from an Indian trader, drove in extreme comfort into Belgian territory by the route indicated. A first-class dinner at Goma on Lake Kivu, which is another Lake Como set in the heart of Africa at five thousand feet elevation, restored their spirits. The following day's journey was relatively easy. The road petered out after a five hour drive ending at a Belgian coffee plantation. The last leg of the journey was on muleback up a narrow track that led into the clouds. At some point along this track they recrossed into British territory, but there was nothing to show where.

The track ended at a cluster of buildings beside a lake about two miles in circumference. A middle-aged man, whose every line and movement suggested a rich contentment, was casting a lure into the center of the ripples where a big fish had risen. The lure was taken, and after a brief struggle a three pound trout was landed. Only then did the fisherman turn. "Hello, Mattie . . . hello, Reggie and Chess! Why didn't you let me know you were coming? Go on into the house while I catch two or three more of these for dinner. You'll find the whisky on the sideboard."

Horace, completely absorbed, resumed fishing. His three guests, stretched out in long chairs on a verandah over the lake, sipped their whiskies as the light drained out of the sky and the rays of the dying sun bathed the snowcapped peaks of the Mountains of the Moon above them in golden honey. "He's a casual devil is our Horace," said the general reflectively, "but he knows what he wants, and d'you know, I believe he's found it."

In the paneled living room a log fire was burning. The almost too-good-to-be-true voice of a B.B.C. announcer gave a lullaby quality to the news. The threat of atomic warfare implicit in the international news seemed far less alarming than the fact that an English cricket team was doing badly against the Australians. It was, like Horace, who had joined them, so easy and relaxed.

Horace switched off the radio, attended to the filling of glasses, and arranged himself in a comfortable chair before he spoke, taking up the slack of the ten years since they had seen each other as though it were ten days. A well-mannered, white-clad African servant announced that

dinner was ready. There was soup, trout fried in butter, stewed lamb, and a baked custard pudding followed by excellent coffee and a liqueur.

"You seem to be bearing your privations with great fortitude, Horace, if you don't mind my saying so," remarked the general back in the living room.

Horace just smiled. Efforts to draw him out about old associations, familiar scenes and episodes that he and Matilda had shared as children, seemed to fall flat. He was a courteous, attentive host, but as Matilda said later in the bedroom, "Horace isn't with us."

In the morning Horace had left the house long before his guests were awake. About nine o'clock there came the sound of a shot from the bamboo forest on the other side of the lake, and at noon Horace arrived with a young wild pig. A long line of porters had arrived during the morning, carrying on their heads the cargo of the truck in which the trio had left Entebbe on their abominable journey.

"Look at this, Matilda," said the general, drawing attention to one man's load, consisting of young fruit trees that had been flown out from England. "What does it mean?"

"It means," replied Matilda, "that Horace is settling down at last." To her, Horace, despite his fifty-one years, was still the wayward little brother, who, if his talents had been guided into more worthy channels, might have turned out so differently.

An idyllic week passed so smoothly that its passage was not noted. The climate was delightful, warm sun in the daytime and chill nights. The lake was just under eight thousand feet above sea level, a trifle high for permanent living but exhilarating when one had become accustomed to the rarefied air. On clear days, peaks over one hundred miles distant were etched sharply against the horizon.

There was no mention of money, gold, or dam building. Horace's mind seemed to dwell upon loftier planes. It was the general who broached the subject. "I thought, Horace," he said one day, "that you had found a gold mine that was going to make us all rich."

"I've found a deposit of gold which, if worked, would make us all very rich."

"I've been over the ground carefully," continued the general, "and you may take it from me that it would cost next door to nothing to dam the lake. Nature has practically made the dam for you."

"I know that," said Horace easily, "but I'm not sure that I want to build it. This is the nearest to perfect of any place I have ever seen in my life and—well, I suppose I don't want to risk spoiling it. Which reminds me, those new fruit trees need to be watered."

"Horace," said Lady Slumgullion severely, "does this mean that you propose to stay here—forever?"

"Why not? I own all the shares in the company now. Picked them up for practically nothing. The mountainside is full of wolframite. The price has dropped, of course, but there's still a small profit to be made—enough to supply my simple wants—"

"Wolframite! I don't even know what that is," said his sister. "But what about the gold? I'd like to see some."

"All right," said Horace. "We'll all go and pan some tomorrow. Make an all-day picnic of it. Very primitive method, of course, but in the old days in the Yukon the big strikes were made by panning gold. Take a shovelful of gravel, swirl it round in a pan of water. The lighter particles are washed away, and the heavier, including the gold, settle in the center of the pan. Simple. Try it for yourselves tomorrow."

Soon after breakfast Horace and his three guests set off on foot down the ravine from the lake's natural spillway, each carrying an ordinary enamel washbowl. The picnic lunch would follow later. After a half-hour walk they came to a spot where the ravine flattened out and divided into two ravines, one of which carried off the stream, while the other was dry. The four persons separated and began with a furious concentration to pan the gravel over an area of several acres, desisting only when called to lunch, by which time each of them had a tinful of gravel in which tiny flakes of gold glittered. There was almost no conversation at lunch. They ate hastily and at once resumed panning. Horace, a student of human weakness, chuckled.

In the evening, by the light of an incandescent oil lamp, the final separation was completed by hand, Matilda using a pair of forceps from her manicure set. Of the four, Matilda had been the most successful, having found a flake of gold weighing a quarter of an ounce. The total find of the party was just under half an ounce.

"How much is this worth, Horace?" his sister asked breathlessly.

"About seventeen dollars—call it a trifle over six pounds," was the reply. "Not even a day laborer's wage. However," he added, "I've spent many a day down there without seeing a speck of gold, while on other days I've found as much as two and three ounces. Don't forget, my dear Mattie, that if gold mining were as easy as it looks, the price of gold would soon drop."

There was little conversation for the rest of the evening. Too many unspoken thoughts hung in the air among these four.

Gold! Barely enough to cover a fingernail, but gold! Not gold in a fairy tale, but gold that could be touched and seen—above all touched. Not minted gold, or gold bought over a counter, but gold wrested from Nature's own treasure house.

"Do you know, Reggie," said Lady Slumgullion in the privacy of their room while preparing for bed, "for the first time for so many years that I can't count them, I'm excited."

"I know, my dear," said the general heavily. "I can see it in your eyes, in the color of your cheeks. You were excited years ago when Horace sold us those shares of Anglo-Patagonian Development, the ones I used later to paper my study wall. I expect trout are excited—before they are hooked. I'm very skeptical about excitement when Horace has stimulated it because it always costs me money. Horace is a bandit. A pleasant-mannered one but—never forget it—a bandit."

"How can you speak of him that way when we are guests in his house, Reggie?"

"Because," was the sad reply, "one way or another Horace intends us to pay well for our board and lodging. Behind that bland mask he wears, Horace is hatching something."

"But the gold, Reggie, you're not suggesting that it isn't real, are you?"

"I expect it is real, my dear, although I wouldn't put it past Horace to have planted the flakes in our washbowls at some stage of the proceedings. Horace has been watching you all the evening while you were doing mental arithmetic, while you were calculating that if four old crocks like us can make six quid or so in a day panning gold in our washbasins a dredger and the hydraulic equipment he talks about, handling a thousand tons of gravel daily, will make us all rich in a couple of fortnights. Isn't that so?"

"Something like that, Reggie," Matilda admitted shamefacedly. "You see, I think Horace has reformed, but you—well, you're prejudiced against him."

"Prejudice, my dear," said the general heavily, "means prejudging—judging before there is any evidence on which to base a fair judgment. I am judging Horace after at least six larcenous attempts upon my bank account. I like Horace. I know he is your brother and for that reason wish to spare your feelings, but do not deceive yourself that Horace has reformed. The Horaces of this world do not reform. They merely grow more cunning and predatory and plausible as the years mellow them. If you will remember that, Horace cannot hurt us again."

Putting his good ear on the pillow, the general went to sleep.

"I hope," said Colonel Bundy two or three weeks after this, "that we are not outstaying our welcome. Frankly I find the place quite delightful and I am in no hurry to go."

"Has Horace tried to put the bite on you?" asked the general, sweeping this delicacy aside.

"No," replied the other in a puzzled tone. "I've been expecting it, of course, knowing Horace, but there's been no sign of it. Is it barely possible, do you think, Reggie, that Horace has turned honest?"

"My dear Chess, anything is possible in an age like this. I read the other day that if ten million apes began hammering blindly at ten mil-

lion typewriters, it would be a mere question of time before one of them wrote the whole of Shakespeare's plays. It is therefore theoretically possible that Horace has reformed. To deny this would be unfair to the man. But I wouldn't count on it if I were you."

Colonel Bundy nodded sagely.

"I wonder, Reggie," he said in a low voice several weeks after this conversation had taken place, "whether you've noticed that there's a dashed lot of activity here these days. A couple of hundred porters arrived this morning with cement. Yesterday another lot brought structural steel. Must be at least a thousand bags of cement in the store now."

"Odd," said the general, "very odd!"

"Cement and steel cost money," continued Colonel Bundy reflectively. "Horace wouldn't spend his own on things like that, would he? I wonder where he's getting it. Have you noticed that he and Matilda always change the subject when we find them together?"

"I have," said the general darkly, "and frankly, Chess, I don't like it."

"Has Matilda got any money that you don't know about, Reggie?"

"Don't ask silly questions!" snapped the general. "If I don't know about it, how the blazes can I say that she has? But I've just thought of something all the same. Before we went to India, which was about twenty-five years ago, Horace was then selling life insurance. Matilda bought a policy to help him. Paid the premiums with the income from her Aunt Clara's legacy. I wonder if she's still got it?"

Porters began to arrive daily, hundreds of them, most of them carrying cement. It went on until all available storage space bulged with bags of cement. "Those chaps look quite cheerful," remarked Colonel Bundy suggestively. "They wouldn't look so cheerful if they weren't being paid, would they? Of course, Horace not being too well known in Africa, he might have borrowed some money, but—"

He left the rest of the sentence suspended in mid-air.

"Matilda," said the general that night as they were preparing for bed, "have you lent Horace any money?"

"No, Reggie, I have not," she replied after a suspicious pause.

"Have you signed anything that has enabled Horace to borrow money from anyone else?" asked the general inexorably.

"I'm tired, Reggie, let's discuss it all in the morning."

"Discuss what all in the morning?"

"What you were—er—asking about, Reggie," replied Matilda smothering a yawn.

"We'll discuss it now. I'm waiting for an answer to my question."

"It was only a formality, Reggie. I just lent Horace my insurance policy for him to deposit with the bank. He's promised to use the first gold to get it back for me. You don't have to worry, Reggie, because Horace

isn't at all like you think he is. He's changed, truly he has, and he is my only surviving relation. I had to do it, Reggie, I simply had to."

"How much is the policy worth?"

"It's only worth about three thousand pounds if I surrender it today, but if I die, it's worth something like five times that. It was the cheap kind of insurance, and I haven't noticed the premiums. The bank has been paying them all these years. After all, Reggie, it's my money."

"If you put it that way, my dear," said the general stiffly, "I have no choice but to agree that you have every right to throw away your money in any way that pleases you. But," he added, thinking furiously, "will you promise me not to tell Horace that you've told me? In all the circumstances it is the least you can do."

"And you won't make a scene, Reggie?" pleaded Matilda. "We'll just go on as though nothing had happened?"

"I won't make a scene and I will behave as though nothing has happened, but I won't disguise from you, my dear, that I am disappointed in you, bitterly disappointed."

The following days passed quietly and pleasantly. True to his promise the general made no scene, and only the acutest observer of the relations between him and Horace could have detected a certain coolness. The general and Colonel Bundy spent most of their time together, fishing in the lake or shooting mountain quail. Horace and Matilda returned to something like their childhood relationship.

The lake was now at its lowest level, for it was the dry season. Across the natural spillway, where only a trickle of water went down the ravine, Horace was superintending the erection of a wooden coffer from which sprouted the ends of structural steel. A cement mixer, brought up in sections by porters, was erected on a platform above the coffer. The work proceeded at a furious pace in the certain knowledge that heavy rain or snow on the high slopes would be followed by disaster.

In the evenings, after long hours at the dam site, Horace resumed the role of pleasant, attentive host. Nothing was too good for his guests. Good wines arrived from the Belgian Congo side, whisky and brandy from Kampala. Lambs, pigs, calves, chickens, ducks, and turkeys were slaughtered for the table with an almost reckless extravagance. The fine trout with which the lake teemed seemed inexhaustible. Nevertheless, despite the good living and Horace's gracious consideration for his guests, a sensitive ear might have detected overtones of tension.

When the time came to begin pouring cement at the dam site, his guests saw little of Horace. He superintended operations for as many hours as he could remain awake. Shortly before dawn one morning the general awakened Matilda. His voice was stern. "Don't ask questions, my dear, but do as I tell you," he said mysteriously. "Pack a case with

enough clothes for two weeks. Dress and be ready to start in fifteen minutes. Pour yourself into those jodhpurs."

When he spoke like that, Matilda knew better than to argue. He had spoken like that on the night the troopship had run aground in the Red Sea. Obediently and wonderingly, she dressed. Horace's snores echoed through the house. Colonel Bundy, finger to his lips, was waiting near the house with two saddled mules. In conspiratorial silence he watched the general and Matilda begin the descent to the Belgian side of the mountains.

At dinner that night Horace asked, "Where are Reggie and Matilda?"

"Matilda has a slight cold," replied the colonel, who hated lies, "and Reggie is out for a walk. He says he doesn't want any dinner."

Horace, who was dropping with fatigue, accepted this lame explanation. General Slumgullion returned alone the following afternoon, having deposited Matilda in a luxury hotel on Lake Kivu. All he had said by way of explanation was that he had taken this action in her interests and that in a few weeks he would tell her everything.

Matilda, who was somewhat bored with life up on the lonely lake and was delighted at the luxury in the hotel, demurred no more.

At dinner, to Horace's perfunctory inquiries about Matilda, the general said that she was feeling better and hoped to be up and about on the following day.

On the following day drama struck. The general was in the middle of the lake fishing. Horace was at the cement mixer, spurring a gang of Africans to greater efforts. Colonel Bundy was on a knoll about two hundred yards distant, watching proceedings. Horace observed the latter making frantic signals but, time being money, chose to ignore them. The general, who also saw the signals, rowed to the lakeshore below where the colonel was standing. Together they went up to the cement mixer, trying to make their voices heard over its clatter.

"She's fallen in the dam!" Horace heard Colonel Bundy shout.

"Who has?"

"Matilda, you damn fool. Stop pouring cement!"

The three men went to the edge, looked down onto the settling cement, but there was no sign of Matilda. "Well, Horace, aren't you going to do something?" demanded the general.

"Reggie old man, there is nothing to be done. There's twenty-five tons of cement on top of poor Matilda now."

"Then have it removed."

"Impossible, old chap, quite impossible. Anyone trying to walk on that would be sucked in. She's my only sister and I'm as fond of her as you are, but there's positively nothing to be done."

Walking sadly away, Horace signed to the workmen to resume pouring. "My dear chap," he said in answer to the general's indignant pro-

tests, "twenty-five tons, or two hundred tons—what difference can it make?"

"Yes, I suppose you're right, Horace," said the general gloomily. "It can make no difference to Matilda—now." He and Colonel Bundy went off together toward the house, leaving Horace on the loading ramp. "Did you ever know such a coldblooded, callous rascal in all your life?" spluttered the general when they were out of earshot. "His only sister lying in concrete that's just beginning to set, and he goes and pours more on her. There's Horace for you. It's hard to believe that he and Matilda are out of the same litter. But I'll fix him."

Horace sent word to hold dinner until ten o'clock, by which time the last of the cement would have been poured. "Taking no chances, see?" muttered the general. "I'll fix him."

Horace arrived triumphant, having completed the dam before the rains, but composed his face suitably on remembering that it was supposed to be a house of mourning. "I hope you realize, Reggie old man," he said gloomily, dipping his muzzle into a long whisky and soda, "that if it would have helped Matilda, I'd have stopped pouring. Least I could have done in the circumstances."

"I fully understand, Horace. It wouldn't have helped her to stop, God rest her soul. But Horace," said the general sharply, looking up at his brother-in-law, "it's going to be a bit awkward explaining it all, isn't it? I mean there have to be inquests and that sort of thing. Won't the authorities insist on having Matilda removed from the dam?"

"Bless my liver and lights!" said Horace, now really alarmed. "I never thought of that. It will cost me every shilling I possess and a lot more to destroy that dam."

Horace fell into a thoughtful silence, which he did not break until two whisky and sodas later. "Reggie old boy," he said at length, "I know you and I haven't always seen eye to eye about things, but it won't benefit you to be vindictive. Nor can it help poor Mattie—"

"What are you getting at, Horace?" asked the general.

"Well, nobody but Chess saw her fall in," Horace continued uncomfortably, "and I was wondering whether—well, whether we couldn't cook up some other tale to account for poor Mattie's disappearance."

"Trouble about that, Horace, is that we couldn't produce the body. The police always insist on a body before they believe anything. And we haven't one."

"Well, let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that instead of slipping into the cement, poor Mattie was eaten by a lion. After all, people do get eaten by lions, and the end result is the same—no body. It certainly wouldn't make any difference to Mattie, and I can't see really that it can make any to you, Reggie. I'd take it very kindly of you if you'd agree

to the lion story. You see otherwise what a fix I'd be in. Dammit, it would cost nearly as much to tear down that dam as it did to build it, and as I say, it's all the same to poor old Mattie. What d'you say, Reggie?"

"All right, Horace, let's say it was a lion. If Chess agrees, that's the story we'll tell. . . . All right with you, Chess?"

"Then it's understood that you'll both support me in that story," said Horace with a look of relief in his eyes.

"No, Horace, I didn't say that," said the general. "It's your story. You saw Matilda eaten by the lion. We didn't. We just accept your word for it."

"That's good enough for me, Reggie, and thanks. How about another quick one before we eat? Moping won't help Mattie, you know. . . . Well, if you won't join me, I'll bring this to the table. Roast suckling pig tonight. Mattie would have enjoyed that, and I'm sure, Reggie old top, she'd have wanted you to enjoy your share. Put on a lot of weight, did Mattie over the last years. Even as a child she liked her victuals. Well, as things have turned out, it didn't matter, but I warned her of it years ago. Reggie old top, why are you looking at me like that? If I didn't know better, I'd say you didn't like me."

Dinner was a silent meal during which Horace, not usually an ultra-sensitive man, shot quizzical glances at his two companions.

Horace, in thoughtful mood, sat at breakfast with his two guests. He was clad for the road. Three days previously, a runner had left for Kitoro, advising the district commissioner there that Lady Slumgullion had had the misfortune to be eaten by a lion. Horace was on the way to make his report in person. "Sure you'll be all right without me?" he inquired, pushing aside his coffee cup.

"I'll be all right," replied the general. "The question is, will you? I'm not so sure about that, Horace."

"What d'you mean?" asked the other, reading hidden meanings into the words.

"Horace," said the general, "I'll give you a few thoughts to carry with you on your journey. Chew them over well. You wouldn't by any chance be going to put in a claim on Matilda's life insurance policy, would you?"

"What d'you mean, Reggie?" faltered Horace.

"I don't think I'd do that, Horace," continued the general, "and I'll tell you why. You've reported Matilda eaten by a lion. You're stuck with that story now, whether you like it or not. You claim on the policy, my lad, and Chess and I are going to say that Matilda wasn't eaten by a lion. We're going to say that she fell into the cement before it hardened. What's more, without specifically saying so of course, we're going to plant the suggestion that you pushed her in. Know what'll happen

then? First, they'll have the dam torn down until they find poor Matilda. Then, when they know that her life insurance policy was assigned to you, Horace, they're going to put two and two together and decide that they make four. That four's going to be your unlucky number, Horace. The judge won't like it, Horace. He'll have nastier things to say to you than the judge said after that Anglo-Patagonian swindle. Then he'll get out his little black cap and wait to hear what the jury has to say. But we know what they'll say, don't we, Horace?"

"You wouldn't do that to me, Reggie!" said Horace in horror-stricken tones.

"I shall not only do it to you, Horace, but I shall enjoy it. However, there is a way out "

"What is it, Reggie? I'll do anything—anything!"

"Right, Horace. Before you leave here, my lad, I want every share in the Mountains of the Moon Mining and Exploration Company transferred to me. I want a statement signed by you here and now to the effect that you obtained the assignment of Matilda's life insurance policy by fraud and false pretenses. You'll get your shares back when I get the reassignment of the policy. Not before. I'm waiting, Horace."

Horace looked at the general's cold blue eyes and knew that he was licked. Somehow, even if he had to use his own money to do it, although he hoped it would not come to that, he had to redeem Matilda's policy from the bank where he had lodged it as security.

Horace was absent for nearly two weeks, but when he returned, he brought with him Matilda's policy. "Now," said the general, "what about the money you've swindled me out of over the last many years? Let's call it six thousand pounds."

"I haven't a shilling, Reggie old man, not until the mine starts to pay."

"Very well, Horace, and don't say afterward that I'm not accommodating. I'll take shares instead of cash."

"But Reggie old man, the mine is legitimate. I've really struck it rich. Wait a few months and I'll pay you off in cash."

"I'll take shares" was the stern reply.

The general and Colonel Bundy joined Lady Slumgullion at her luxurious hotel on the shores of Lake Kivu, which she was in no hurry to leave. "I insist on knowing now, Reggie," she said at dinner the first night, "why you and Chess bundled me out of Horace's house in such a hurry."

"The fact was, my dear," replied the general, "that poor Horace went round the bend. Must have been the altitude. Chess and I thought you ought to be spared the ordeal of seeing him like that."

"Horace round the bend?" said Matilda. "I don't believe it."

"My dear, whether you believe it or not, Horace went round the bend."

Signed an official statement to the effect that you'd been eaten by a lion. I've got a copy of it if you'd like to see it."

"Reggie," she persisted, "I just can't believe it. Horace isn't the kind of man to go round the bend—it isn't like him."

They talked of other things.

"By the way, Matilda," said the general as they were sipping their coffee after dinner, "you remember that life insurance policy you assigned to Horace? Well, before we left the lake, I persuaded him to reassign it to me free of all encumbrances. I have it with me."

"Oh poor, poor Horace!" exclaimed Matilda moistly. "Then he really has gone round the bend. He'd never do a thing like that otherwise. Why didn't you tell me before?"

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

Brad Tuttle, wanted in Kansas and residing in Texas, murdered Greta Rankin.

MONDAY

FL.	COUPLE	WANTED IN	PRESENT HOME
5	Andrew and Irene Queen	Ohio	Wisconsin
4	Brad and Flora Tuttle	Kansas	Texas
3	Carl and Janice Peters	Nevada	Virginia
2	Donald and Greta Rankin	Michigan	Utah
1	Edwin and Helen Simpson	Louisiana	Wyoming

WEDNESDAY

FL.	COUPLE
5	Andrew and Irene Queen
4	Donald and Greta Rankin
3	Edwin and Helen Simpson
2	Brad and Flora Tuttle
1	Carl and Janice Peters

FRIDAY

FL.	COUPLE
5	Carl and Janice Peters
4	Donald and Greta Rankin
3	Edwin and Helen Simpson
2	Brad and Flora Tuttle
1	Andrew and Irene Queen

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



William Kent Krueger's third novel, **Purgatory Ridge** (Pocket, \$23.95), again takes readers up north to the small rural community of Aurora, Minnesota, where Cork O'Connor lives with his heiress wife and two daughters. Cork is no longer the sheriff, but old habits die hard and it doesn't take a super sleuth to deduce that the community may soon see violence. The grandson of a lumber baron has moved into the area with his wife and stepson. He's built an isolated lakeside home, renovated the sole mill left in his family, and bid on a pristine area of white pine to cut. Unemployed loggers are back at work, and the community is profiting. But the trees marked for cutting are sacred to the region's Anishinaabe; worse, rumors have it that some of the outsiders who've flocked to the area to protest are part of a militant eco-terrorist band. Mixed into this volatile situation are Cork's wife's involvement as attorney for the Anishinaabe, the resentment burning in the heart of a local man who has lost everyone dear to him, and the desperate plan of a greedy psychopath. Krueger handles his novel's tough issues with objectivity, while etching his background with precise detail and developing his characters with many facets and deeply held feelings—all very representative of the culture and traditions of this little piece of the world he's chosen for Cork's home.

Another dab hand at crime fiction is Anne Perry, and her latest Monk and Hester historical, **Slaves of Obsession** (Ballantine, \$25), offers a special treat for her Stateside fans. As always, Perry teases readers with an intriguing crime. A respectable arms dealer whom Monk and his wife Hester have recently met is found murdered at his warehouse. His guns and his daughter are both missing and are apparently on a ship bound for the United States in the company of a Union soldier who had been sent to England to purchase munitions. The widow admits that her daughter was taken with the dashing young soldier and his anti-slavery cause—but would the girl watch her lover murder her father? At the widow's request, Monk and Hester follow the couple and, after a har-

rowing battlefield arrest, return with them to England. The accused soldier swears that he paid the victim's foreman for the rifles, while the besotted young daughter insists on being tried with her lover. So Hester and Monk team up with the defense attorney, their old pal Rathbone, to uncover evidence that supports the accused man's story. As always, Perry offers a romantic tale laced with suspense. Her novel rings with authenticity, whether she's writing of a bloodsoaked battlefield or the bed of the Thames seen with Victorian-era diving equipment.

Ellen Hart's food critic and Twin Cities hotel owner Sophie Greenway is back in another culinary caper, **Slice and Dice** (Fawcett, \$6.50), and it's mouth-watering. Connie Buckridge is a local woman who years ago developed a reputation as a hostess and a caterer before moving on to become a TV celebrity chef. This Julia Child of the Midwest is back and staying at Sophie's hotel with her three children, son-in-law, and brother. Dogging Connie is a biographer who has already made pots of money with her tell-all bestsellers, and someone in Connie's inner circle is leaking info to the woman. Add to this stew the renewed attraction between Sophie and her first love (the chef's son), the attraction between husband Bram and the biographer, and the arrest of an elderly restaurateur and old friend of Sophie's for murdering *his* chef. This is a smorgasbord of devilment. And don't miss the recipes included in the back.

A young widow and single mother, an appealing small-town Wisconsin setting, and a psychopathic kidnapper all add to the suspenseful mix in Martha Powers' **Bleeding Heart** (Simon & Schuster, \$23). After her husband's death in a car accident, Maggie Collier moves herself and her small son to her late husband's boyhood home, where she opens a bookstore. Together with her father-in-law, George, they make a small but cosy family. Then her father-in-law is murdered on the golf course of the country club after his weekly poker game. It appears to have been a mugging until a pushy attorney shows up from a distant big city. He's on the trail of his nephew, a small boy kidnapped from a department store almost a year earlier. George had spoken to a friend the night of his murder and claimed he'd spotted the child. Suddenly the small community of Delbrook doesn't seem quite as safe any more. There is probably enough to like in this one to satisfy the fans of woman-in-jeopardy mysteries, but the identity of the psychopath may not come as much of a surprise.

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THE STORY THAT WON

The September Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Rex M. Berntsson of Freeville, New York. Honorable mentions go to Debrah E. Lashley of Kingsport, Tennessee; Art Cosing of Fairfax, Virginia; Jan Streilein of Aiken,



South Carolina; Ron Mayer of St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada; Amy E. Cryer of Gaithersburg, Maryland; Robert Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; and B. J. Bourg of Mathews, Louisiana.

ZAPPED by Rex M. Berntsson

Heat lightning, he thought, those silent flashes in the night sky. It was the weather for it, if not the season. Almost Thanksgiving now, but as Arlo sat on his porch in that freak heat wave, it might as well have been July.

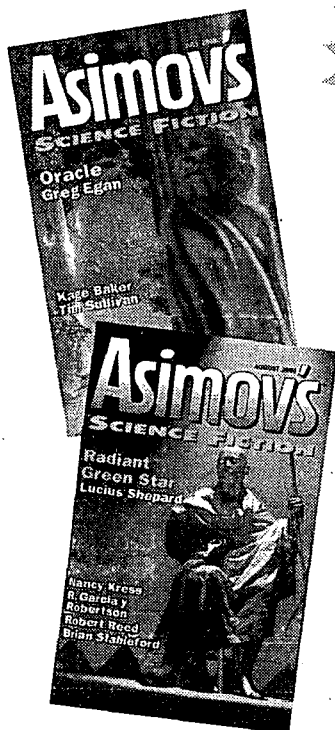
Except for the bugs, he realized, glancing at the electric “zapper” unplugged in the corner. On a summer evening they’d follow that light, and he’d watch them zap, flash, and fry. No bugs now, though, not this time of year. Arlo watched the heat lightning instead.

Only those flashes were really coming through the trees, once he thought about it. Nothing in those woods but old Harold’s sugar shack, and he headed for it. Closer in, the flashes weren’t so silent either. When he made the shack, the doors were open, sparks were flying, the air crackled and the light so bright it lit up the woods and hurt his eyes. Then the lights went out—hard.

He woke with his face in the dirt and a knot on his head. The shack was quiet, but the cops figured it had been busy enough. The acetylene torches could have been for any number of nefarious purposes. No telling for sure, since the perpetrators surprised Arlo before he saw more, and he surprised them enough that they left real quick.

Arlo still sits on his porch when the weather suits, of course. Zapper’s gone, though. It just wouldn’t be the same, now that he knows how the bugs feel.

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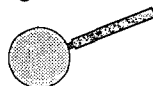
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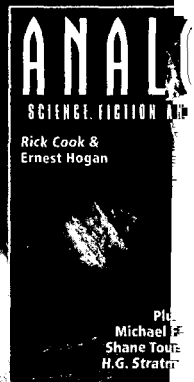
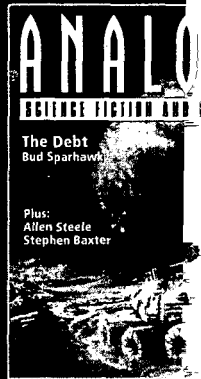
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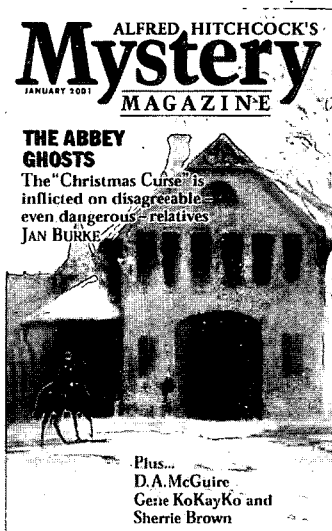
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